

YOUR FRIENDS *will carry you* HOME  
A D A M G N A D E

Born in San Diego, California, Adam Gnade (pronounced “guh-nah-dee”) cut his teeth at the house parties and all-ages shows of his hometown’s experimental art scene. His work is released as a series of connected novels and audio recordings of writing. Recent novels released as co-publications by Three One G and Bread & Roses Press are *This is the End of Something But It’s Not the End of You* (2020) and its sequel, *Float Me Away, Floodwaters* (2021). *Your Friends Will Carry You Home* is the final book in Gnade’s “Home & Away Quartet,” which began with *After Tonight, Everything Will Be Different* (2022), *The Internet Newspaper* (2023), and *I Wish to Say Lovely Things* (2024). The quartet is inspired by the work of Lawrence Durrell, especially his “Avignon Quintet” and the “Alexandria Quartet.” The “Home Away” books explore the topics of food, work, love, and friendship, respectively. Gnade lives on the six-acre Ruby Teeth Homestead in rural Kansas near the towns of Tonganoxie and Lawrence. He runs the audio book record label Hello America Stereo Cassette and tours regularly, both domestic and abroad.





YOUR FRIEND



*will carry you* HOME

AWAY



**Bread & Roses Publishing and Three One G**

ISBN: 978-1-939899-48-4

First paperback edition, January 5th, 2025

Copyright © 2025 by Adam Gnade

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction.

Editing by Jessie Duke

Interior art and book design by Bran Black Moon

Cover art by Valeska Hykel with lettering by Andrew Mears

Research assistance by Elizabeth Thompson

First paperback printing by KC Book Manufacturing

Printed in the United States of America

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2



## Praise for the writing of Adam Gnade

“These are stories of domestic drama and friendship, wild youth and radical hope.” -Andrew Mears, author of *Opened Ribs are a Church Full of Sky*

“Lucid, life-affirming prose from an empathetic master.” -Yannis Philippakis of the band Foals

“Adam Gnade is a writer who can capture what it feels like to feel everything.” -Dana Margolin of the band Porridge Radio

“Adam creates another world through his writing, one that is visceral and sharp, and helps this one make more sense.” -Lora Mathis, artist, author of *The Snakes Came Back*

“Adam Gnade is the kind of talent who will remind you how necessary it is to stay human, stay empathetic, stay true, stay punk.” -Szilvia Molnar, author of *The Nursery*

“In all of his work Gnade achieves a wide range of effects—lyricism, poignant description, philosophical depth, humor, characterization—in a singular style that’s born from many years of focused, intense dedication to his craft.” -Bart Schaneman, author of *The Green and the Gold*

“Adam Gnade is the king of underground fiction. Every word is truth.” -Nathaniel Kennon Perkins, author of *Wallop*





*Your Friends Will Carry You Home* is for A.M., with love.

The following assisted in this book's creation and deserve endless love and thanks: Elizabeth, Jessie, J.P., Jack, Liam, Bran, Becky, L.D., Andrew, J.S., Valeska, Verbatim Books, Nate, Bart, and Lora. -A.G.





*PART  
ONE*

Concerning the Carpet of Flowers, the Westward Bus, the  
First Night in Bristol, and the End of Her Favorite World

I didn't hear the bone break like you do in movies, but I knew something was wrong. (No, it's fine, I thought, worry about that later.) God I was happy lying on my back, arms and legs spread like an X, the floor a sea of crushed flowers, soft as deep carpet beneath me while my friends danced to the music of the band on stage in front of the wall of stained-glass windows—the ancient shapes of stake-burnt clergymen flat in the planes of glass, dark with evening.

Breathing in the smell of red wine soaking my shirtfront and the flower shop scent of a thousand trampled roses and orchids, I shut my eyes and felt the bass humming in the medieval floorboards—a deep, low, churning vibration like the voice of some old cosmic god. I imagined the sound raising my spent body up and carrying me off like an army of ants bringing me as tribute to their queen.

Let the fucking ants take me, I thought happily, staring up at the stone ceiling, the blur of movement encircling me, my friends ankle-deep in flowers, and the lights from the stage flashing on the walls lined in mounted jousting shields. Let the ants carry me out the door of the feast hall (leaving a trail of flower dye like a river of blood) and along the dark corridor past the glass display cases of swords and knives and into the courtyard and bring me down beneath the hot black earth to their queen.

Hello Queen of England Ant, I am James Jackson Bozic, human American, and this heatwave summer I am fighting a tragic curse. Lift my curse, bestow the title of Knight of Smashed Flowers upon me, and I hereby swear I shall become an ant too. I will carry ten thousand times my weight because work is what I do best. Your majesty, I, your servant, promise to fight in any wars you care to start, and I won't ask why or what we're fighting for. (In fact I will love it.) Ants forever, I will say. It shall be my war cry and those with the bad luck to hear it will drop their weapons and flee into the woods, clutching their heads in terror then fall to the ground with shame, shouting, "Why O' why hath this dark age come?" Because fuck a broken bone, I thought. Because fuck the pain. Leave me on the carpet of flowers with my friends dancing all around and I will sink into the night and laugh forever.



Four days earlier, the curse not yet upon me, my red-eye flight from Kansas City International hit London Heathrow near sunrise. I unsnapped my seatbelt, pulled my shoulder bag from under the seat in front of me, then shuffled down the aisle past the smiling, nodding flight attendants, and took a series of windowed hallways and tunnels out to customs, too tired to think or care about anything but setting one foot in front of the other and getting outside.

At baggage claim, a crowded, featureless, gray room with no windows, I picked up my luggage—a small, red leather, hand-held suitcase from the 1960s—and took a hallway to another hallway to another featureless room. I changed my two hundred in US dollars for British pounds at a kiosk, then caught an Express train to Heathrow Central Bus Station and asked directions for the National Express coach to Bristol.

The bus ride was warm and drowsy and quiet. Nothing like the Greyhound in the States with people smoking in the tiny restroom even though it's illegal and shouting into their phones and arguing with each other and the driver. It was quiet enough I missed the rowdy Greyhound at first, but a few minutes into the ride I was glad for the quiet and felt lucky and settled in with a fine, sweet pleasure.

From my seat I watched green England flash by the window. "Green England," I said under my breath. And gray England too. The gray sky like black-smudged watercolors. Low clouds to the east, dark with rain. The ash gray motorway. I'd been away five years and it was a nice thing to watch the familiar green fields and hills racing by from the comfort of a bus seat and to know my friend Andrei Merce would be waiting there in Bristol for me.

I daydreamed out the window at the small farms in the distance and the white dots of sheep clustered on the edge of the woods; the fields and hills crossed by the gray lines of stone walls; the kind you make while clearing rocks from a field to build pasture. And it should be said ages ago you made that

stone wall and ages ago you cleared the field because everything in this part of England seems ages ago; except in the city when you are faced (often unexpectedly, if you'd been in the countryside long enough) with rows of drab tenement apartments and somber housing projects, severe against the sky like Soviet tower blocks. But the farms could as well be Victorian—the rough, gray stone buildings, comfortable, good-looking places with ivy massed over a front wall and smoke rising gray-blue from a chimney. Near the farmhouses stood tidy stone barns or any manner of walled-in paddock, chicken run, or hog sty. While beyond and around the gray farms stretched the lovely green fields and hills with sheep and cows in small groups; clean, well-fed animals surrounded by the broad expanse of unpopulated distance. (Never the feedlot horrors you see in Oklahoma or rural California or Texas—those vast acres of black mud and filth and animals to their knees in it, and not a blade of grass or tree in sight.) Here, you might catch the naïve, uncritical part of you thinking, “Oh how serene” or “What an idyllic place to live.” It was (or it seemed) a still, quiet world; and an unrealistic one because passing by in a bus, the picture you're shown is nowhere near the full story. Like anything witnessed from afar or viewed across brief, scattered, transitory moments, you are given fragments, sparsely detailed vignettes at best.

“Oh, the gin,” I said aloud without meaning to then looked around to see who saw me.

No one. The seats mostly empty—an elderly couple in the front of the bus behind the driver, the woman's snowy head higher than that of the man; a teenage boy a row ahead of me, knees to chest in an aisle seat looking at his phone, ear buds in.

I twisted the cap off the mini gin bottle from the flight, shoved it (the cap, no bigger than a cherry's pit) into the left hip pocket of my jeans and drank half then the other.

The gin flushed my face and lifted my spirits and I caught myself sighing deeply with the warm, joyous satisfaction of finally (after too long gone) returning home. Which of course I wasn't. (Returning home, I mean. This was something else.) I stared out the window—happy, my thoughts coming fast to me as we passed travel plazas with rows of parked cars and white deliv-

ery trucks, motorway crash barriers blocking the view of small towns, graffitied railyards in the mist. And the rain had begun. But when? I hadn't noticed.

Get to work, I told myself, then slid my manuscript out of the shoulder bag I'd carried on the flight, took off the five or six rubber-bands that held its pages in place and began to make notes in the margins.

Now time passed without mark or impression. Inside a story you can leave the painful, frustrating real world behind while you build your own. Even if what you're writing about is just as painful and frustrating and real, you can take a sort of escapist gratification if it's distanced enough from the time or situation you are in. The joy in that is something I look forward to, and without fail rushed through each morning the past few years, skipping breakfast and hardly waking in a proper sense before sitting down to work, and ended the day sapped out and brainless.

Each winter since the onset of the pandemic three years prior I'd published a book and was at the time of the bus ride to Bristol wholly wrung out and emotionally spent. I'd kept up this schedule because writing and publishing serves both as a means of therapy and a way to feel like life isn't just a fruitless march toward old age, sickness, and death. The pragmatic side is I had no other way to feed myself and keep a roof over my head, and each year both grew increasingly expensive. I saw no way free of that other than working hard enough to make the kind of money where I could slow down a while. The year before, a book of mine had gone viral and money poured in for months, and when the hype ended, and sales returned to normal, I had to readjust. I "made it work" was my positive spin on scraping by each month, but I found no way to come out on top or move forward or put money aside for an emergency. I made it work. Yes. But no matter how many books of mine sold, the amount of money I made was steadily less sufficient against the rising cost of basic human existence. So, I worked. Each day and without rest.

The rain came in earnest now, spraying in sheets and wild gusts against the windshield of the bus as the driver slowed down;

the brake-lights in front of us a smear of polished red like wet paint while the wipers beat back and forth with their pleasant *tock-tock* sound. Stopped in traffic now on the edge of a town, with the absence of road noise and the bus engine quiet, you could hear the rain drumming against the metal rooftop—a bright, percussive sound like popcorn popping. I felt tired and content as the water ran in marbled patterns down the windows obscuring the outside world in glossy, aqueous silver.

I worked a while longer then shoved my manuscript back in the bag between my copies of *The Odyssey* and Lawrence Durrell's book on Cyprus. Zipping up the pack before stuffing it under my seat next to the red suitcase, I pulled my legs up onto the bench and got sideways and tried my best to lie down. The view of the window across the bus aisle in the opposite row was of rainy glass reflecting the colors of the traffic outside and the lights of the town in warbling veins, gold then white, gory red on wet mercury. At that moment, I remembered the second travel bottle of gin and was excited for it then immediately felt silly. God how stupid to be thrilled about something as nothing as a plastic bottle of airline gin and a bus seat to myself. You sappy, romantic amateur, I thought. No. Stop. What point in questioning your happiness like it's something you need to regulate or appraise or contextualize? You go to war with yourself over trivial things and that awful, nagging voice you know is not quite your own will win out over your true self. You will become your anxiety. You will listen to your unquiet thoughts until they are the dominant voice. Anyone knows a quick way to kill off your true, braver self is to listen too often (and with enough attention paid) to the inconsequential doubts that talk at you when you are trying to enjoy a simple thing. "Relax, you stupid piece of shit," I said under my breath. I unscrewed the little brass-colored cap, pinched the edges of it flat like a duck's bill for no reason other than to do it, and jammed it into the pocket of my jeans along with its twin. "Fuck it," I said, louder now, because no one was there to hear me, then sipped the little bottle and got comfortable. Now the bus began to move, and we headed west again to Andrei and Bristol.



Between my arrival in town and the reading Andrei wanted to take me to, we had just enough time to catch up for the briefest few minutes and drop my bags in the room I was staying; then we were outside, walking down the hill, the street lined with shops and pubs and small grocery markets, the sun beginning to set over the housetops—a soft, clear white and butter yellow dusk. At the coach shelter we climbed aboard our bus. We talked on the bus then continued to talk as we stepped off the bus (“Thank you,” “Cheers, mate,” to the driver), then talking as we walked a half block to the bookstore, talking as we got a glass of red wine each from the table near the entrance and talking in our seats as the room filled up.

We sat quietly through the reading, then we were back on the street walking to a pub with one of the readers, a close friend of Andrei’s, Helen Grey, whose piece at the reading was a long, sprawling, quietly hilarious story about all the husbands she’d had and the strange, awful things they’d done. (There were hundreds or perhaps thousands of husbands in the story and what they’d done often defied reality in a soft, dark, surrealistic way that kept you interested.) The outside of the pub was nondescript. I nearly walked by, but then Andrei said, “Here’s us,” and opened the door and Helen and I went in. The pub was quiet—empty apart from the staff. On the TV behind the bar, a football game played with the sound off; the bartender drying pint glasses with a rag, watching the bright green field and the men running across it after the ball. We ordered a round of gin and tonics then took a booth in the back. Helen talked about a reading she was meant to do that week in London—a big one, prestigious—and Andrei talked about ours, the next night in Wales with another of the writers who’d read earlier, Jake Miller. We talked about him, about Jake, and about the history referenced in the piece he read—the Aberfan disaster of 1966; the landslide of coal waste that wiped out a small Welsh mining town. We talked about the queer DIY sober space Jake ran in Cardiff we were booked to read at.

Andrei tried to pronounce the name of the venue. “It’s. I think.

It's, I can't even begin to say it. Dee ee ah ewe?"

Helen laughed. "It's not that."

"Beautiful language. But well difficult, isn't it," he said. "How do you say it?"

"I'd rather hear you struggle," she said.

"Isn't Catherine Zeta Jones Welsh?" I asked.

"She is," said Helen.

"Do you think she's related to Jake?" I said.

"She's his mum," said Andrei. "Jake's famous mum."

"Jake's mum, Zeta," I said.

"You mean Catherine? Cate? Caty?" asked Helen.

"I call her Zeta," I said.

"I call her Jake's mum," said Andrei.

I held up my gin and tonic glass. "What do you guys think about this glass?"

Helen laughed. "Your actual glass or this style of glass in particular?"

"This style. How it looks. I feel so stupid holding this." The glass was wildly oversized. Long stem. Deep bowl like what you'd get a margarita in but much bigger.

"That's what everyone drinks gin and tonics from," said Andrei.

"Were they always like this?" asked Helen. "I mean it's what you see now."

"I feel like the last time was in England—"

"Which was when?" asked Helen.

"Four, no it was five years ago," I said. "I feel like—like back then the gin and tonic glasses didn't make you look like such

an asshole. Like they were—weren't they those—the regular ol' cylinder style glasses? But these?"

"They are quite huge," said Helen. "Should we ask for better glasses?"

"We look like awful, insufferable pricks," said Andrei. "At least you two look like pricks. I'm doing just fine." He got up and walked to the bar.

"What do you suppose he iss doo-ing?" I asked in a bad French accent without thinking of why.

"Getting better glasses for us," she said.

"We deserve at least—at least like an eight percent refund for making us look like stupid idiots. Maybe nine percent."

"Nine's more than fair and to be honest? It's a bit too modest," said Helen. "Personally I would demand eleven percent, final offer. And if they don't accept? Smash all the windows and burn the place down."

"If they want a war, we'll give them a war," I said.

"It's the only rational thing to do," she replied.

Andrei came back holding three plastic half-size shot-glasses.

"What are those cute little things?" I asked. "Baby glasses. Put them in a diaper."

"Tequila," he said, setting them down in the center of the table.

"So that's where tonight is going," said Helen.

"It's gone there," said Andrei then did the dry, wicked laugh he does when he's up to no good.

"What are we drinking to?" Helen asked.

I heard the volume of the television unmute and the crowd cheering then the sound of the door opening (and street noise for a moment before the door clapped shut).

“To us, to friends,” I said.

“To you being back in England where you belong after what feels like much longer than five years,” said Andrei.

“To both,” said Helen, warmly.

We drank our shots, laughed at the horrible taste, talked briefly about good and bad tequilas—this one was bad—then another round of gin and tonics arrived followed by another, both of which came in the stupid glasses. Andrei and I told Helen about tours we’d done together in the past; about our habit of celebrating before anything worth celebrating had been done, about mindless antics in the pursuit of fun, and when Helen asked questions I noticed she was slurring now.

I said, “You’re slurring.”

She said, “You are too.”

“Am I?”

“A bit,” said Andrei, gently.

“Sure. I guess I am sorta slurring,” I said.

“It’s hard work, isn’t it,” said Helen. “All those s’s and r’s.”

Andrei (not slurring) told a story about a reading we did at Oxford University hosted by a literary society neither of us could recall the name of; how at the afterparty at the Star pub on Rectory Road I told everyone I was proud that while I hadn’t had a shower in a week I didn’t smell bad.

“And you made everyone smell you and—”

“—and I didn’t smell bad.”

“Did you smell bad, though?” he said. “I don’t remember. I was quite fucked.”

“Here,” I said. “Smell me. Day and a half awake. International flight, two airplanes, a train. What else, an Uber—some—no, many buses later, I smell great.”

I raised my arm and Andrei leaned in and back again. “You don’t smell like anything.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Helen.

“Try,” I said.

She leaned in and back again. “You don’t.”

“See!” I hit my fist against the tabletop and the glasses clattered and mine splashed a few drops.

“What if this is, like, his kink? Tricking people into smelling him,” said Andrei and the dry, wicked laugh happened again.

“It worked,” said Helen.

“Oh. I think they’ve closed,” said Andrei nodding in the direction of the bar where a darkhaired girl in a white tank top stood behind the register dividing cash into separate stacks. “We should—yeah—let’s go.”

Helen sipped the last of her drink and I finished mine and we stood up.

“Ooh, I felt that,” said Helen. “Sometimes you don’t know until you stand up how much you’ve truly had.”

I began to walk away from the table and Andrei said, “Mate” and tipped his head sideways in the direction of our table—right, my empty glass.

“When have you ever cared about being nice?” I said as we brought our glasses to the bar.

“I’m only rude to bad people. Like yourself for instance. Bad people like you and Helen,” he said.

Out on the street, the night hot, sticky, we walked Helen to her bus then headed up hill toward the house.

I was very drunk then and very happy and suggested we run the rest of the way up the hill instead of taking a bus.

Without reply, Andrei began to run, then I was running, and we

shouted to each other as we passed the darkened storefronts and as the night traffic whipped by, up and down Two Mile Hill.

“It is way too fucking hot!” I shouted as we ran.

“Been hot for weeks!”

“England’s not supposed to be hot!”

“World’s changing, mate!”

“Make cold England great again!”

“It’s record hot! Like shuts everything down. Trains and that.” He stopped running and leaned forward, hands on his knees. “Ugh. I’m out of breath. Feel it in your chest, don’t you.”

I stopped and sat down against the metal accordion gate of a shop.

“Oh. My god. My heart is like—” I said, hand to chest, fighting to catch my breath “—like. About to. Explode. It’s going so fast.”

“Come on. Look, that’s ours.” He offered a hand and helped me to my feet, and we walked up the hill toward the stop as the bus pulled to the curb.

“I can’t believe we ran up a hill,” I said. “Why did we run?”

On the bus we said hello to the driver who didn’t reply and tapped our debit cards on the reader then took the stairs to the top level and sat down in the front row—the yellow-lit streets passing silent below us. I began to tell Andrei about last year—about Frankie and her boys moving back to Kansas from Michigan, about the death of our friend Byron, my book going viral in the middle of it all, Alison’s endless job search, the odyssey of getting Frankie to Kansas, Byron’s funeral, the hard times following the move, Alison and Frankie’s big falling out that took months to fix, Frankie’s troubles finding a place to live in Kansas.

“Sorry. That sounds completely incoherent,” I said.

“Go on,” he said. “Oh, our stop.”

I continued to talk as we got off at our stop, and while we walked from one shop (closed) to the next (open) to get a bottle of wine, and talked as we made our way back to Andrei’s house in a row of identical ones; talked as we went down the narrow, dark hallway to the staircase, talked as we took the steps to the lounge and kitchen on the lower level, talked at the dinner table while I struggled with the cork, and then recapped the events briefly when Vika came downstairs to say hello.

Sitting across the table from them I was impressed with how little they’d aged in the years we’d known each other. Andrei and Vika—both slim, darkhaired, pale, sharp like glass, intense. Vika with effortless good style in dark jeans and a loose white top. Andrei the picture of a young, demonic intellectual from an Old World that doesn’t exist any longer (and maybe never did) wearing a plain button-up shirt like mine (sleeves pushed up to the elbow) and narrow-leg trousers. Sitting at the table I tried my best to tell them about last year and the hell Frankie and Alison and I went through but there was so much to it, and trying to get it all out as one coherent story made it confusing.

“It sounds confusing,” said Vika.

“I mean. Yeah. It is,” I said, topping off Vika’s glass, then Andrei’s, then mine.

“Go on,” she said. (Andrei and Vika, patience to the utmost.)

When you tell a story late at night over drinks there’s much you leave out. You do your best to give a sense of how it felt and to impose an intelligible, cohesive timeline, but the memories arrive disconnected from the order in which they occurred. The story in your head is an irregular, jolting procession of details—both clear and indistinct, diminished by the passing of time. Try as you might, a good amount is left out while you digress into tangents and backtracking. Later, you think of what wasn’t told.

The timeline and logic of the story made no sense unless you were deeply involved in the events or a firsthand witness to the ensuing web of convoluted, entropic details; the chronology of which goes that when everything fell apart, Frankie and her

kids caught a cheap Spirit flight from Michigan to San Diego in July with the intention of the boys not going back to the house. I flew out to San Diego from Kansas where we spent Johnsy's tenth birthday at Disneyland. Then Jude, the boys' dad, flew down from Oregon, and we did the yearly handoff—the boys out to Bend until September, like every summer. After which Frankie and I flew from San Diego to Michigan to get her chickens because she'd promised Willy and Johnsy she would bring them down to Kansas. (Which of course wasn't a simple thing to do, but she didn't want to let the boys down. They'd been let down enough.)

In the Las Vegas airport during our six-hour flight delay, I got on the internet and rented an SUV to pick up in Michigan. It had to be big enough for three large dog crates full of chickens and whatever else Frankie could fit in the open spaces (she planned to move the rest of her and the boys' things later when her partner Lee was out of the country). Problem was, all summer the rental industry had experienced a statewide shortage of cars thanks to Covid-related supply chain issues. Which meant we had to rent ours quite a bit away in Jackson, Michigan. To make it work we would need to catch a commuter bus from the Detroit airport to Ann Arbor, rent a compact car to get us to a crop-duster airfield in Jackson with a rental department from the same company, drop the compact in Jackson, switch it for the bigger car, and drive to Chelsea, Michigan, where Frankie and the boys and Lee lived on eighty wooded acres. So it was Las Vegas airport to Detroit airport to hotel shuttle to hotel, in at 3am, a few hours of sleep there, hotel shuttle to airport commuter bus station to Ann Arbor followed by an Uber from the bus station to the rental agency to get the compact car, then driving the compact to the airfield in Jackson, where we were told there were in fact no cars at all at the location despite what the internet said, then back to Ann Arbor in the compact to pick up a slightly bigger car—not the size we needed for the move but large enough at least to bring the chickens to their new home in Kansas.

At the house, Frankie packed the chickens into dog crates and cleaned out their coop while I slept a few hours on the floor of the boys' room surrounded by all their things, just as they'd left

them when they flew to San Diego never to return to the house or to this life with Lee as their stepdad.

I awoke to the sound of car wheels on the gravel—Lee, home from the gym. Then the sound of the front door opening and Lee’s heeled shoes on the floorboards and a few minutes later Frankie and Lee began to talk in the front room. (The talk became a fight and I tried my best not to listen.)

We left their farm just as the sun began to set—a beautiful, calm, emerald-green dusk, sunlight filtering through the trees in slanting golden rays and glittering in silver discs on the surface of the pond.

Frankie and I drove all night back to Kansas with the chickens in their crates while she played her fight songs playlist. We talked quietly about what lay ahead and what was left behind. Often we didn’t talk. She stared out the window. At the dark fields passing. At the moon as it lifted over the black swell of hills. When we did talk, Frankie said things like, “I don’t want to do this,” and she said, “I can’t be here anymore.” I tried my best to comfort her, but what I said was lost in the poison mist surrounding her and it did no good. My friend who for years took a knock and fell like anyone, then stood back up ready to fight, had fallen and was down and not getting up.

I told Andrei and Vika about Frankie and Alison and I in the house together and how sometimes we got along great but also the fights, the misunderstandings, the days when Frankie didn’t get out of bed; how Frankie moved from our place to her sister’s house in town then flew back to Michigan a few weeks later to rent a moving truck and pack up the rest of her things while Lee was in Peru; how whenever I thought of Lee in Peru, I could only think of *Paddington 2* and that felt surreal and terrible because *Paddington 2* was wonderful and wholesome but Lee in Peru while Frankie packed her and the boys’ belongings was not.

Fundamentally, and at the very bottom of everything, Frankie wanted to die. It cast a deep shade over each day, above any good thing. She wanted to be gone. More so—to kill herself, to be responsible for her end, to commit the violence of the act.

Alison and I sat up late and talked about it. I lay sleepless in bed imagining what would happen were I to walk into her sister's house one morning to find her in the room—there but gone. This was no idle threat. She wanted death. She wanted to stop feeling the pain she was sure would never leave. Nothing I said made a difference. Still, she kept moving.

After she and her mom drove the moving truck down from Michigan, Frankie and I flew back to San Diego for a book-fair then I flew to Minneapolis, rented a car at the airport, and toured across country as the opening act of a popular English band—touring west to Portland where Byron's funeral was to be held at the beginning of fall. Frankie flew from San Diego to Portland with her bookfair money, and we met up at the funeral, then drove east through the mountains to Bend, picked up the boys at Jude's, and drove back to Kansas. (There, the "It sounds confusing" from Vika and my agreement.)

So, yes, a timeline, but that wasn't the story. The story was staying up late with Byron's ex Stacy at her house in Portland the night before the funeral talking about the last we'd seen or spoken with Byron. The story was Stacy and I looking at photos of him she'd taken years before—the moody Polaroids like hazy little paintings with the thin white frame around them; Byron staring at the camera, and at us, eyes narrowed, bearded, a can of Bud in his hand held at chest level, an Oregon beach scene behind him with gray sand and purple sea or Byron and Stacy cheek to cheek in a photobooth sequence; in the first frame staring face-on (serious like Old West tintypes, lots of hair, sunburns, eyes silvery), then looking at each other (smiling, Byron's eyes squinting, wrinkled up in the corners), then kissing each other, her hands on his face. The story was Stacy sitting on the opposite end of the couch as me in her living room, crying, sloppy wasted off an endless succession of White Claws, then laughing, then angry, and how watching her go through those cycles made me worry she would never stop mourning; that, like Frankie, without the one person she loved and trusted above all others, Stacy was lost and incomplete and would go through life as an alien or as a shadow of the living. Byron was as gone to Stacy as was Lee to Frankie. Both suffered deeply and without cease as they fought through the loss, the feeling

of having something cut from them, a piece that would not be there again and because it would not be there it was (or it seemed as if it was) a wound that would not heal.

The story was of course the funeral—the big, well-lit room with its polished wood floors and many windows; the friends of ours who were so much older now and how some drank during the service and looked haggard and some didn't; and you could tell Byron's family because they were dressed like country stars from the 1970s and seemed otherworldly as if backlit by sunlight.

After the room filled up with Byron's friends, some of whom, like Frankie, had known him since high school, I stood behind the podium on stage and welcomed everyone in and gave a list of what was going to happen and didn't lighten the mood with a joke about Byron and me at South by Southwest like I'd planned.

Byron wasn't there. His body. That was ash already. Cast into the sea by his mother. But where had he gone? I caught myself scanning the faces in the crowd for him because he would have been there—arriving late, standing in the back, leaving early and alone. Up on stage in front of the crowd I thought of one of the songs off Byron's final record—an old timey hymn about the wings of the dove. A scratchy first take of Byron playing guitar and singing with his mother. A son and his mom singing together at her home. Then ashes, the sea.

After the funeral—the streets gold-lit with dusk, and everyone out on the sidewalk, the gray concrete washed adobe pink with the light, some of us smoking, some of us in suits, small groups, a few posing for photos, arms wrapped around shoulders, laughing more than you'd think they would, some still crying, others quiet, withdrawn, and there parked at the curb sat Stacy's enemy Lisa on her Vespa about to leave and Stacy rushing her, stopped short of fighting by two of the bigger guys in the group, and Stacy very drunk, throwing a wooden chair in the street, then getting the chair and carrying it back to the sidewalk, setting it down carefully before falling sideways into a bush, laughing and singing.

The story was Frankie crying quietly in the passenger seat of the rental as we drove late at night through the mountain pass to Bend after the funeral and how like Stacy maybe Frankie would never be happy again, that the brave, capable, hilarious friend of mine was gone and this new hurt, broken one was here and nothing I could do would stop her from slipping away.

Driving east, and a thousand texts to Frankie and me from Stacy about how sad she was. Then, later, an Instagram story—a blurry closeup of Stacy’s face, eyes glassy and unfocused, shouting, screaming, “My best friend is fucking deaaaa—” and the word “dead” cutting off before the “d” and for some reason that was worse than if she’d said the whole word and left me uncertain of whether any of us would be the same again or if this new era was just suffering and failure after the successes of youth; that this was a time of pain layered upon pain until you couldn’t remember how it felt before the pain was there. The days before pain felt like something faded by sun and years-back; too easy to be real or like a scene from a dream you were now forgetting and would one day lose entirely.

But the pain wasn’t the full story either. It was also the boys singing the Rickroll song as it played on the car stereo while we drove through high desert. It was Frankie talking quietly about getting back to her true, strong self—the self she’d put aside for so long out in the woods. It was complimentary motel breakfast (toast, biscuits, bagels) and junk food lunch at gas stations, hashbrowns in diners, and how each meal felt like its own small celebration.

The story was the obsidian fields in the desert Stacy told us we should take the boys because obsidian is the stone that protects travelers. We collected pieces of the black volcanic glass and put them in brown paper grocery bags—the desert quiet, not a breath of wind, and the silence beautiful and you felt safe walking in the sand and across the brittle, sunbaked rock-flats with no one for miles; picking up black shards here and there, rubbing the dust off on our jeans, then holding them up to the sun to see the light glow darkly in them.

The story was the rundown gas station we found with its analog pumps like something from an old forgotten America, and that

was thrilling in a quiet way, and we felt as if we'd stepped out of time, and agreed that if there were ever a time to step out of, the last few years would be a good one.

The story was the comfort of night drives in a rental car you knew wouldn't break down and if it did, who cares, it wasn't on you, you'd get a new one delivered by the agency. It was the joy in triple-locking motel room doors behind you and a hot shower then bad TV with dinner from the vending machine—Oreos, ice cold cans of Dr. Pepper, apple juice boxes for the boys, mini bags of pretzels, Ruffles, microwave popcorn, Chex Mix.

Trying my best to get the timeline straight I neglected to tell Andrei and Vika about the lovely high desert stretching endless in all directions with our car as the center-point, a dead sea, rock and low hills, the silvery puddles of mirage streaming across the highway up ahead, and in the distance a small roadside zoo connected to a ratty gas station, and above the gray cyclone fence a camel staring into the distance.

“Look guys,” said Frankie in the passenger seat. “A camel.”

“What?” said Willy, half asleep.

“A camel, look,” I said, pointing to the right of us as we passed.

“A camel!” shouted Willy and Johnsy at the same time.

I didn't talk about how happy I was that they would be living nearby after so many years away and how guilty I felt about it because this was not a happy thing for Frankie. This was collapse, a defeat, the end of her favorite world.

Very late at night after I told the story, Andrei and Vika and I talked about what makes a story, about the things you leave out, the stories you try to tell but are unable to, the stories you plan to write but never get to for countless reasons, the ones with missing pieces, the confusing timelines damaging the narrative, the unreliability of memory, the tricks of bias, and the limits of conversation. I told them about the book I was working on and how I tried my best to come to terms with what I thought of as the “between time.” How in the between time you try to live as well as you can and not think about your stories be-

cause, like Hemingway writes in *A Moveable Feast*, the breaks between writing help the stories arrive better and clearer when you come back to them; how while you are away your subconscious gets to work arranging the information into narrative, and that sometimes what you had trouble with while working will be there in finished form once the between time is over. Or you hope. You hope leaving for a while will set right what you can't actively fix.





# *PART TWO*

Concerning the Curse, the Between Time, the Castle, the  
Serpent Church, and the Matchmakers

I lost my lucky hat. That's what did it—how I got cursed. I told Andrei over breakfast the next day that while I don't believe in luck I'm still afraid of upsetting the balance and getting the bad kind.

Sitting at the table, a cup of instant coffee in front of me, I told him, "Now I'm fucked. The curse cannot be broken."

He laughed because he knew I was both serious and joking. "But you're always cursed," he said. "Just look at you. No one that ugly isn't cursed."

"It's making way for dark events ahead." I slid one of last night's empty wine glasses a few inches away from me then pulled it back to the same spot. "I hope you're ready for this."

"You don't believe that," he said then got up from the table and took the wine glasses by their stems in one hand and the empty bottle in the other and walked into the kitchen.

"I don't," I said louder so he could hear me in the kitchen "—and I also kind of do and the kind-of-do is enough to get me worried."

"Mate."

"I know how I sound. But I'm cursed now. This is something we have to—" I laughed "—let's just accept that bad things will start happening and there's—I can't do anything about it. Just. Like. Gotta endure."

"You're having fun with it," he said.

"I'm having fun with it. Kind of. But I still believe in it—I mean, in a way. It's like with superstition. I'm not superstitious. Because of course. But would I pick up a penny tails-down? Fuck no. Would I stay on the thirteenth floor of a hotel? Absolutely not."

The lucky hat was a black cloth auto shop cap with "Basin Valve Company" in bright copper-colored embroidery, the black faded rust-brown in parts. On one side I'd stuck a little handmade pin for Byron's band after he died (which immediately made

it feel more important than a regular ol' hat). Then at some point recent yet unremembered I decided the hat was "lucky," and once I tell myself a thing is lucky I get attached to it in an almost spiritual way—whatever "it" is. Though usually "it" is an item of clothing or something functional. The hat was a lucky thing I hoped never to lose or damage beyond functionality. Should that happen it would go in a place of honor in my bookshelf back home with other relics—retired but still lucky (and of course loved because no lucky thing is ever unloved). I told Andrei I must've lost the hat last night at the pub with him and Helen, that I remembered having it when I got to Bristol and remembered wearing it to Jake and Helen's reading.

"It was gone when you woke up?" he said from the kitchen, standing over the sink, rinsing off tomatoes for our breakfast.

"It was."

"You didn't sleep in it?"

"No. Come on."

"Wouldn't be out of character," he said as he sliced the first tomato. I heard the muffled tap of the knife as it hit the cutting board then the sound of the toaster releasing and the room began to smell like warm bread.

"True. It wouldn't be. Anyway, I've looked everywhere twice for it."

"So, we've got—on this we've got avocado," he said. I heard the clatter of silverware dropped into the sink. Then the sound of the water tap as it turned on then off. "Tomatoes. Salt and pepper. Mayo. Oh, let's do oregano. Cilantro?"

"Yeah, please."

For a moment the kitchen was quiet while Andrei diced up the herbs.

"Afternoon breakfast," he said, setting my plate in front of me, then sitting down on the other side of the table with his.

"Afternoon breakfast," I repeated. "This looks great. Thanks."

I lifted the toast piled high with avocado, tomatoes, and herbs to my mouth and took a bite.



After breakfast Andrei and I walked down the hill and caught the 43 citylines bus. Andrei warned me on the way that public transport was in shambles thanks to the heat—routes canceled or put on delay, trains held up at the station, engines and old infrastructure overheating (rails too hot for the wheels is what people said).

At our train platform, great crowds stood waiting under a pale blue cloudless sky, the sun baking down. Not a stir of breeze. Light shining off the glass and steel.

The first girl we saw in a pink cowboy outfit didn't seem out of place. "She looks part of a hen do—a bachelorette party," said Andrei, translating the last bit for me. But then a second walked out the station doors and behind her two more, and soon there were dozens coming in and out of the station, disembarking from buses and Ubers, lining up for tickets, getting drinks from the kiosk, standing in the shade of awnings fanning themselves with pink cowboy hats. "Oh. Right. Of course. Harry Styles fans," said Andrei, squinting across the section of empty rails at a group of them gathered by the exits on the next platform. "He's got a residency in Cardiff this week," he said. I told him something like that sucks because there goes our audience for tonight and he said, "If only," before making a ledge with his hand and shielding his eyes from the sun. "Goddamn there's a lot of them," he said. They filled the station now. Pink cowboy hats, pink or white cowboy boots, some with leather fringe, pink feathered boas, miniskirts and tank tops like NFL cheerleaders. "Today is going to be absolute bollocks," he said. I told him I blamed the hat and he laughed. "What? The lucky hat did this?" I said I blamed this hatless fucking day and said never go abroad without luck on your side. "Are you abroad?" he said, humoring me because he knew I was using the word to make fun of myself.

"Abroad" is a terrible word for travel. "Vacation" is even worse.

Leaving the country for better places just because you can feels like an insult to those who can't after years of recession and plague and the growing imbalance between wages and the cost of living. I need a purpose to travel or a reason (or at least an excuse practical enough to call a reason). My purpose in England was to do book readings and make enough money selling my books at those readings to cancel out the slow months when people are outside doing summer things. English audiences at readings buy more books and merch than Americans. They're quicker to go out, even on a school night, and they stick around and pay attention. ("I can't. Not on a school night," is what you hear in America when friends beg off attending your event. "School" of course meaning work the next morning or a smokescreen over the fact that they have aged out of the night-life. "Or they just don't like you and your stupid books," said Andrei when I mentioned the idea. Fair enough. That too.) By my math the price of the plane ticket would be offset by the number of books I'd sell; not to mention the performance fees I'd get from venues. A summer tour is essential to the goal of staying solvent each year when the good weather hits; an international tour being far better than one stateside but there were US dates to follow. After England I would be home a few days before a flight to the West Coast for readings in California, Oregon, and Washington. A month after that I'd head back to California for one final bookfair of the year. Before England I'd done a book release party in San Diego at Verbatim. A few weeks after San Diego was a reading, a panel on publishing along with Frankie, and three days sitting behind a table with my books in Las Vegas, New Mexico. Other than the tour-dates, my job in England was to hunker down and finish the first draft of the new book, removed from the distractions and responsibilities of home.

The personal reason for leaving, the true stuff, was getting to spend time with friends like Andrei, which I needed just as much, if not more, than the book side. There's that line Springsteen has in "Dancing in the Dark" about how he's "sick of sittin' 'round here tryin' to write this book." You can't write about life if you don't live your life and you can't be happy with your life if you don't have some sort of community to give you reasons to be happy. (Even if that "community" is one other

person and a cat. You need something. “Going it alone” is a capitalist trap.) This is something I need to remember because my natural inclination is to isolate myself then work until I’m run into the ground. (The result is both you and your work suffer, and if why you’re working is to do something good and you’re not doing something good because you’re working too much? Now all you’ve done is create a problem for yourself.) In matters of the heart and soul, the answer should always be: Stop working and go run off somewhere good and be human for a while with your fellow humans.

Americans are a restless people. Especially those of us who grew up near the sea and had the arrivals and departures of a port town engraved into our fiber. Mornings spent at the waterfront with my parents while they did business meant the tarry smell of the pier boards as the sun warmed them, and beyond that the (imagined or not) smell of new places on the breeze. There is a particular joy and pain as you watch the ships leave harbor. They grow smaller as they put distance between themselves and port, and if you’re anything like me you wish you were on them, and the restlessness builds inside you like oil rising to burst from the ground. Restlessness. The restless West. Some of us are born with the need to get the hell out of town on a regular basis. But going just to go stopped feeling respectable a long while back.



Andrei and I found a spot in the shade of the rail station. He leaned against the wall and I sat on the ground cross-legged, fanning myself with an electronic music fest flyer I’d picked up off a bench.

I stopped fanning and read the flyer to Andrei. “Fabio & Grooverider and the Outlook Orchestra Present a History of Jungle and Drum & Bass.’ Wow, that sounds like the worst thing on Earth. Oh, Grooverider’s your new nickname.”

“Yours is—let me see it.” I handed him the flyer and he looked for a name off the list of acts scheduled to perform. “Yours is Ben Soundscape.” He dropped the flyer on the ground, stepped

on it, and scraped it across the pavement a few times. “Well! That’s what I think about that,” he said cheerfully.

A pair of Harry Styles girls approached us.

“Know if the train to Cardiff’s late?” asked one in pink cowboy boots, a white leather miniskirt, a pink t-shirt with an H and an S in glued-on felt letters, and a glittery pink cowboy hat.

“It’s delayed an hour at least,” Andrei told her.

“Should we text Jake and tell him we might be late?” I asked Andrei.

“If we get another delay we will.”

The girls stepped into the shade next to us, one sitting down like me, the other leaning against the wall like Andrei.

The standing girl backed off a bit from the wall and pulled a white, boxy Polaroid camera from her bag.

“Smile,” she told her friend.

“Nah, iss too hot, Ally. Ah look dradeful.” Her face was pink and shiny with sweat. “No photos.”

“Hush. You look fit and you know it.”

“But if iss bad we toss it in the bin. Promise.”

“Promise. Alright. Smile. This one’s for Harry.”

The girl sitting against the wall cocked her head to the side, smiled big, and made peace signs with her hands.

“Lu, not peace hands.”

“Why?”

“Do hearts. Hearts for Harry.”

The sitting girl made a heart sign with her hands.

“Say Harry.”

“Harraaaaay!”

“That’s good. Now wait. And—”

The camera clicked and the picture slid out the front with a raspy mechanical whir.

“Remember, they say get it in the dark quick as you can” said the sitting girl.

“I know.” The standing girl tucked the photo in the waistline of her skirt and pulled the hem of her t-shirt over it.

“How longsit need?” asked the sitting girl.

“Five, ten minutes, doesn’t it.”

“Shall we go have a tea?”

“Somethin’ cold. I could do with a Pelegrino.”

The sitting girl got up and they walked into the station.

“You know they call Pelegrino ‘Torie piss,’ right?” said Andrei.

“I like Pelegrino.” I wiped the sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand. “I might get one too.”

“One bottle of Torie piss, please!” he said happily with an innocent, bright-eyed expression, pretending to order.

“The grapefruit Pelegrino is the one,” I said.

“Grapefruit Torie piss, please! Piss it right in my mouth, please!”

We were quiet for a while. I watched the people come in and out of the buildings. Listened to them talk. Watched them squint up at the sun and look at their phones and head back inside or find a spot of shade.

Andrei unzipped his shoulder bag and went looking for something. His phone. He swiped a finger across the screen and his brow furrowed as he read what I imagined was a text then set it back in the bag and zipped it up again.

“Harry Styles is well good, though,” said Andrei.

“His songs?”

“I learned one for Nick’s wedding,” he said.

“Sing it.”

“Don’t tempt me.” Andrei made a face where he tucked his lips up against his gums and stared at me, all bucky horse teeth and a crazy, mindless look in his eyes.

“I can’t get over hot-England,” I said, staring up at the cloudless blue sky. “Since Wales is a different country maybe it’ll be cold when we get there.”

“Probably,” he said, after fixing his face.

“You walk through the magic coat closet then you’re in the woods and it’s snowing.”

“That’s how you get to Wales unless you’re taking the train like us,” he said.

“Or you get sucked into a painting of a ship at sea. God I would kill for some rain.”

Andrei shook his head. “Nah, no killing. Too American.”

I laughed. “I shouldn’t laugh.”

“You shouldn’t laugh. It makes you look like an ape,” he said.

“I’m laughing at you more than anything, though.”

“You’ll soon be crying, mate,” he said. “If I’ve got anything to do with it.”

I met Andrei Merce ages ago thanks to a record label that was at the time prepping release of his band’s first and only full-length record. The label had just issued a collection of audio recordings of my writing backed by music and booked a tour for Andrei’s band with me as support to promote both albums. I flew to London, caught a train and a bus a few hours later to our first show, and we got along immediately and without effort. An-

drei's band was like a new version of '70s prog but coming up from hardcore and heading toward pop. It was catchy, heavy at times, racing along into sudden stops then starts with glorious, ecstatic trumpet parts and Andrei's guitar leads and the guitar of our friend William Erlich twisting around each other like eels or poison oak vines. Andrei's lyrics with the band made for beautiful, ornate verse. It was the kind of band people give their hearts to and obsess over, and they (the band) rose quickly in popularity both in England and the mainland until they immediately (and before their time) called it quits. (Since then, a sort of cult following has formed around their recordings.)

Vika and Andrei are well-matched. Her work at the time was based around monotype printmaking; a process involving paint applied directly to the mesh of the screen. This makes each print of a series unique and gives it a stronger sense of dimensionality than a regular screenprint. There's a feeling of depth there, or at least you see the layers as depth. (If it's a trick of the eye, it's a trick well-constructed.) Vika's latest were images of flowers with rich black backgrounds, the colors smeared in places giving the impression of seeing the object through dirty or rain-streaked glass. The colors of the flowers had the dark, somber tones of the Dutch Golden Age paired with an almost neon-'80s second voice.

Vika has a restless sort of energy you might mistake for impatience or distraction. Sometimes it seems like she's moving underwater and when asked an unimportant question ("Where did you put the keys?" or "Is there butter left?") it's as if she needs to surface and adjust once more to the light. It's a trait you see in highly intelligent people—the separation or division of reality onto two planes of consciousness—the contemplative, pensive internal and the quotidian external—and the stutter while shifting between the two. Once surfaced she has no obvious or perceptible trouble in social situations and moves gracefully in a crowd. She's very smart and very sweet, and that's a rare and admirable thing. Vika and Andrei make sense together in a fundamental sort of way. I can't imagine either existing without the other and I don't want to.



In Cardiff we walked across town to the park where we were meant to meet Jake Miller. The hot streets were packed with Harry Styles fans headed in the same direction as us past vendors at kiosks or standing behind card-tables under shade canopies selling Harry Styles merch. We passed racks of pink feather boas and silver glitter Covid masks then a stand selling white bucket hats reading “I (heart sign) Harry.” Above the stands, colorful triangle-shaped banners with “HS” or “I love Harry” printed on them rippled and snapped in the breeze. Some of the kiosks sold wafflecones and you could smell the burnt vanilla scent of them in the air.

“Maybe I need one of those ‘I love Harry’ hats to reset my luck.” I nodded at the merch stall as we passed. “I could tell people it was for Harry Nilsson.”

“They’re not bad,” said Andrei. “Oh, what does Harry Styles do when he’s happy?”

“I don’t know. When he’s—oh, right, yeah—” I laughed even though it wasn’t that funny “—he Harry Smiles. What about when he’s the largest living reptile?”

“Harry Saltwater Crocodiles?”

“Hairy Styles would be a great name for a dog,” I said.

He laughed. “Hairy, like dog hair?”

“Hairy Styles would be such a good dog.”

“A proper good boy,” he said.

The name joke continued as we walked among the fans; stray pink and white feathers from all the boas underfoot, crushed on the red brick streets and wet in the gutters like fallen leaves.



We met up with Jake Miller and his ex Del under a large oak tree in the park. Jake and Del sat cross-legged facing each other drinking beer from cans and smoking cigarettes. Andrei knelt next to Del and I sprawled out on my back in the grass and listened while they talked.

Andrei and Del talked about tonight's show while Jake typed Welsh words into his phone and showed Andrei and had him say them.

"Say this," Jake said and showed Andrei his phone screen.

"Kesh yew ee are?" said Andrei before taking a sip of his beer.

Jake laughed then typed something else in and showed Andrei the phone.

"It's—oh fucking hell—it's, uh, cigga lie sow?"

Jake shook his head happily. "James, try this one."

I propped myself up on my elbows. Jake's screen read "swydd chwythiant."

"You serious? Jesus, um, like—swayed chewy thee ant?"

"Perfect. You got it," said Del.

"Really?" I asked, surprised.

"No, not even near," said Del, taking their sunglasses off then rubbing the lenses with the hem of their shirt. "Don't worry. No one gets Welsh."

"Most people in Wales don't even speak Welsh," said Jake.

"Too bad. It's a cool sounding language," I said. "Looks great written down too."

Jake held an unopened can of beer in my direction. I shook my head then Del reached for it and took it.

“Ffffaaanks, ‘ppreciate it,” said Del in a high singsong voice that made Andrei laugh.

Jake wore black trousers and black boots, a black knit cap, and a black sweater with a collared white shirt and red tie underneath despite the heat. Del—in baggy jeans and a loose white sleeveless shirt and big, square-framed sunglasses. Both seemed carefree and relaxed and treated me like I’d known them for years. It felt nice to be dropped into someone else’s social group and not worry about being judged. Waging social war against outsiders is universal, whether it’s a tiny clique or a nationalist government or a pack of wild dogs.

I settled back with my hands laced under my head and watched the leaves move in the breeze.

“Two of you ready for the show?” asked Jake.

“James and I are ready for everything at all times,” said Andrei.

In the shade of the tree with the wind blowing, the day finally felt somewhat approaching cool after hours of sweat and glaring sun. I watched the branches of the oak lift and settle back again with the gusts. In that moment I couldn’t imagine a world after the heat and drought to come, a place with hot, dead oceans and forests of tree skeletons. I’d read an article on the plane about crops and by extension beloved foods we’d lose because of climate change and another about the next set of animals heading toward extinction.

Lying in the grass under the tree a thought occurred to me that instead of writing the sort of books I write, I should write ones describing the things we’re going to lose; to catalog what once was for the benefit of the people who would never see them. Of course all of that is in countless videos already, but will the Earth of the distant future have electricity and internet or will we be living in ruins? Instead of writing about my life and the lives of my friends should I write about the sweet faces of the tiny pea-sized frogs we get out on the farm after a good rain and about the strawberry fields around my aunt and uncle’s house on the coast in Central California? There is so much that should be remembered. The gray harbor seals with their

friendly doglike faces and shiny black eyes basking on the dock boards back home in San Diego. The smell of mud silt and the sound of the marsh birds at the river piers in Virginia. The soft purple flowers covering the hills in Kansas once spring hits. Peonies, snow, ice storms, wild roses, cicadas, squirrels, ferns, manatees, sunflowers, bobcats, wolves, fireflies at dusk in bright neon spots in the woods, their light fading off then rising to a gentle glow again. When Willy and Johnsy are my age will there be polar bears left? How many species of birds will die off without most of us noticing? When I think of hell I imagine it like the third panel of Bosch's *Garden of Earthly Delights*—the landscape crowded with bleeding, screaming, half human half animals, impalements, beheadings, a demon eating people and shitting them out at the same time. Maybe hell is what's ahead—an empty, burned Earth. Towers of dead trees dotting an ash landscape. Blank spaces. Ghost-town neighborhoods and schools and playgrounds. Dust storms ripping across gray fields. God what a fortunate thing to lie on your back in a park with friends. What a lucky, easy way to live.

Jake showed Andrei the Welsh words for “go to hell, shithead” on his phone and laughed when he couldn't pronounce them and Del cracked open another beer and flicked the foam away with the back of their hand in Jake's direction while Andrei laughed his dry, wicked laugh, and the day moved slowly and forward without haste.



The morning after the Wales reading I walked alone down Two Mile Hill to the bus stop with a printed-out ticket to London folded up in my pocket. The day was hotter still, and the sky a merry light blue with scattered streaks of clouds and a good, strong breeze. In my shoulder bag I carried my wedding clothes and a copy of what I'd been asked to read during Jackson and Victoria's vows.

I met Jackson Holmes-Phillips in Portland the year I moved away. He came along with Willam Erlich from Andrei's band. Both were in the States working for an English music festival company and were just back from a weekend event in the

Catskills. They stayed at the house a week while I packed. William did drugs in the bedroom or spent time off on his own in the city while Holmes-Phillips helped me clean scuffs off the hardwood floors and wrap dishes in newspaper and put them in boxes as if he'd been a longtime housemate. He and I painted walls to cover three years of party stains. Bought and hung a door from the architectural salvage to replace the one a previous housemate kicked to pieces in a fit of joy. We loaded box after box into a moving truck then drove it to a storage space out in Gresham. The last trip we took to the storage facility began at dawn. (We had been up all night with William and Byron and hadn't slept.) Jackson and I drove into the industrial lot as the sky began to lighten from purple city black to that trademark Portland gray. Just inside the gate stood a group of men in front of one of the big orange garage doors rolling dice. A bald man built like a club bouncer or an ex football player took a knee (with some effort, holding his lower back with one hand and leaning slightly to the side) and first kissed then tossed the dice against the metal door, and a few others (big men, like him, older than us, slow moving) walked over and leaned down to look at the numbers like they (the pair of dice) were an animal who'd just been hit by a car. Score tallied, another man picked up the dice and took his turn. Jackson asked what they were doing, why they were here so early throwing dice. I told him they were rolling to see who got first dibs on someone's foreclosed storage container. Maybe it had to do with getting (some manner of) priority at the foreclosure auction that would happen later or something more specific to the process I knew nothing about, but they were here for people's lost things—boxes of clothes I imagine, family photos, books, children's toys, various personal collections, heirlooms from dead relatives, sports equipment, furniture. Jackson was shocked at the barbarity of it. (I was as well, but I played it off like some tough cowboy American who saw this shit all the time.) He said something about how they looked like demons gambling for someone's soul and I said they kinda were, and we got in then got out as fast as we could, and the getting out felt good and was a relief. Driving away I promised myself that once I had the money to come back to Portland and move all this stuff to Kansas I'd never rent a storage space again. On the trip back to the house we talked about the predatory nature of a dying empire;

its wake of violence, waste, and plastic sprawl. “Capitalist 2009 America’s kinda brutal,” I told him. “Kind of?” he said. “More than kind of,” I said, “and it’s gettin’ worse.” And it did.

Jackson Holmes-Phillips and I got along from the first. He was very young then, but even at twenty-one there was something motherly about him. Holmes-Phillips is the sort of friend who will kick down a brick wall to make sure you’re safe and happy. He cares about your welfare, checks in on you, and solves problems you can’t. He’s the capable, gentle, steady friend you turn to when you’re in the absolute worst of it and can’t see your way clear. He’s a fixer and a master at everyday logistics and does both for his job at the BBC. On location in rural Somethings-bury, Holmes-Phillips will find the one toy electric car racing set needed for a scene or while in Norway will procure a pink hat-box from 1953 made by a long-shuttered Oslo-based company if the director wants it or will track down a reclusive interview subject for an important segment. When the world goes to hell, you want Jackson Holmes-Phillips at your side. He’ll solve what needs solving then whip up a plate of marmalade sandwiches for you and make sure you’ve got a good coat for the weather (and maybe button it up like the sweet mom that he is).

Earlier in the year, when Holmes-Phillips announced his engagement to his lovely Australian girlfriend Victoria, he messaged and asked if I would read something at the wedding during the ceremony just before the vows. I told him about the unfinished novel I’d been hammering away at and that I thought a short section from the first chapter might work. I sent him the excerpt and he sent back half of it and said the half would fit nicely and it was agreed.

When you love someone and you know they are about to embark upon an endeavor sure to make them very happy, and when you support that decision without reservation, there’s a sort of parental or even filial pride that comes along with it no matter your relation to the person or the difference in age. When you know and love both parties (I’d met Victoria during the last book tour here) it’s even more powerful. People cry at weddings for all sorts of reasons. Often it’s performative or maybe it’s sad because things are changing quickly and you’re scared to exist in this new altered place. Pride is part of that

too. Sitting on the crowded bus from Bristol to London I told myself if I cried at the wedding you could blame my pride—pride in their love, in their friendship. And why fight it? Let it out. It's fine. Cry all you want, you miserable shitty infant. I told myself this in the Andrei Merce voice, and with those words I felt strong and happy and ready for what may come.

London is a fine place to visit if you have money and less so when you don't. Headed toward Hampstead Heath where Holmes-Phillips and a few friends were gathered for a wedding eve picnic and drink, I thought of my bank balance and the remaining cash then did bits of math in my to-do book while worrying myself into knots about the next few days. The money from last night's reading wouldn't hit my account 'til Monday; not that I could check my balance and see. Arriving in-country I'd done a dumb thing and decided against getting a UK sim card. Figured I'd find wi-fi signals everywhere, and so far I hadn't. Unable to check my bank balance or contact anyone or buy train tickets in advance or use my phone's maps while on the go, I was back in the early 2000s and my phone felt like a dead stone in my pocket. Being in a foreign country (being anywhere away from home) without a workable phone requires a sort of psychological step backwards. You see quickly how dependent you've become on its interlaced system of tools and how difficult it is to extricate yourself and go back to "how it was."

On the bus I paged through the pocket notebook I'd filled with hand-drawn maps, routes, and lists of transport times. From Andrei's street I'd grabbed the 43 citylines east toward Bristol City Centre, got off at Bond Street and walked to the bus station where I picked up the coach I was now on, the A1 Airport Flyer. Plan after that—exit Temple Meads, walk to platform 13, take the GWR towards London Paddington, get off at Paddington Station Eastbound Terrace, and catch the 46<sup>th</sup> to St Bartholemew's Hospital. After that I planned to walk a mile or so to the park grounds where the group would be meeting.

So bus to bus to train to bus and the great city passing by; traffic in lines of cars and small utility trucks and red double-decker buses. Huge groups of people massing on street corners waiting to cross. Tall buildings blocking out the light. I shut my eyes

and sat listening to the conversations behind and around me, and felt disconnected from home and from Alison and from Andrei back in Bristol, and a somber, dull, self-pity set in. No. No more, I told myself. Here you are in London headed to see people you love and you might not have a lot of money, but you'll get by because your friends won't let you down. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and pay attention to where you are and where you are going. And I did. I paid attention to London. To the tall bus and the people in their seats in front and behind me and the crowded streets rushing by. The Turkish shops with photos of the food on the windows like you see at Mexican restaurants back home. Fruit stands with beautiful, yellow-streaked red apples and mounds of oranges and piles of bananas. Bookstores and record shops next to fancy pubs next to theaters next to small, single-topic museums. A whole world of signs. A sign reading, "Goat Curry Lunch Special Only Today." Signs advertising musicals and drink specials. Signs about discounts and sales. Signs painted on shop windows. Giant letters as tall as me on billboards. Flyers for bands and club nights wheatpasted on the plywood retaining walls of construction sites. Signs for Pakistani restaurants. Greek food. Jamaican groceries. Halal. Off license. CCTV. Signs saying, "Shop Cheap Now" and "7 pounds a pair, 10 for 2 pair" above a sunglass rack outside a market with the light flashing off a thousand lenses.

I watched well-dressed Londoners walking past in dark suits or bright colored tucked-in blouses and short skirts, heeled shoes, modern sneakers, green tweed, colored stockings, gray argyle sweater vests over Oxford shirts, flowered headscarves, saris, monk strap shoes with brass buckles catching the sun, shiny leather briefcases swung a bit to keep pace with a quick step, department store shopping bags held in the hook of a finger, teenagers in oversized t-shirts and baggy jeans like '90s ravers, young guys dressed workingman's goth like Ian Curtis, kids in school uniforms with ties and blazers, families moving together like oil through water in the crowds. Then a kid Willy's age in a gap between crowds on a skateboard, bending his knees a little before pulling off a perfect kickflip.

The bus slowed to a stop and people around me stood up, gathering backpacks and shoulder bags, some talking with friends,

others staring straight ahead with ear buds in or looking down at their phones. Then the smell of car exhaust and the sounds of the street outside when the doors popped open. New people taking the steps to the second level and sitting down. The ping-pong alert sound of a phone's notification going off. Bits of conversation. "Hiya. You alright?" "Naw, she's inna bad spot if I'm to be honest." "Aye, iss tomahtoes, cheesenbread like a peesa." A soft recorded voice announcing something to the passengers; too quiet to be audible. "Vut vas just said?" a girl behind me asked in a German accent and the woman across the aisle said, "Oh I 'aven't a clue, love." In the row across from me—a young mother looking at her phone, her son next to her playing some sort of Tetris-style game on a tablet then the mother saying a few words to him in Arabic before kissing the top of his head and resting her cheek on it. The teenagers in front of me—talking about a school assignment and how their teacher was "a right fohking twot" they wanted to throw off a building or crash a car into or send a buncha dogs after. It was beautiful, all of it—the dense, crowded, hectic, complicated humanity of so many of us in one place. The moods and tones, the colors, the light, the blend of voices and sound. I told myself to enjoy it, and I was. London, I thought. Now you're in London, you dumb lucky fool.



Booking my hotel after the picnic at Hampstead Heath, the curse hit again. Earlier, Holmes-Phillips offered to cover my hotel room (I couldn't afford even the worst hotel anywhere near the wedding), but when I booked and paid for the room over wi-fi in a Crouch End bar, I used a website I didn't catch was a scam.

After I finished booking I grabbed a ride from the bar with a friend who'd been with us at the picnic. He dropped me at Finsbury Park and I took the Thameslink Brighton train, exited Farringdon, rode the Elizabeth line Shenfield to Whitechapel then walked a half mile to the Ibis Budget hotel.

Upon checking in I was told that, yes, the room had been reserved—reserved, not paid for. Certain I'd done something

wrong and the website hadn't in fact charged me, I paid, took the elevator to my floor, unpacked, and showered. After the shower I sat on the bed, signed into the wi-fi, and checked my bank balance on my phone and found a surprise three hundred pound service charge from the booking website along with the two hundred I'd paid to book in the Crouch End bar and the two hundred from the hotel itself. In a panic I searched the company and read review after review about how it was a scam, but were you to read the website's "about" page (and who does?) you would learn they charged you to reserve (and only reserve) your room and tagged on an extra service fee (the three hundred pounds) and you still had to pay for the room upon checking into the hotel. It was a scam but a legal one. I sat back against the headboard of the bed—beat, deflated. Now I was out three hundred pounds for the service charge plus two hundred of Jackson's money and another two hundred of my own. Until the money from last night's reading hit my account on Monday I was down to the double digits with only a few pounds left in cash and wouldn't have enough to get out of London after the wedding, not to mention pay for a place to sleep tomorrow night. People are garbage, I thought, they want to rip you off and they don't even care how bad it fucks up your life. "You stupid piece of shit," I said out loud. "Fuck!" I shouted and immediately thought of how silly I must look. I got up and pulled my boots on, took the last twenty-pound note from my wallet, grabbed the room key off the dresser, and rode the elevator down to the street.

Once outside, the night air was hot like it had been all day, but where before it felt stifling, now it was a relief—air, fresh air, outside, the world outside, and god how beautiful it was in this dark streetlight-lit neighborhood full of market stands and vendors in tents; narrow alleys with people coming in and out of cafés blasting Middle Eastern dance music and afro-pop; the crowd a blend of too many languages to parse out and the good smells from countless dinners cooking and the bright, sharp citrus scent of hookah bars. Life. People being people and me one of them. People—mostly well-intentioned (if at times delusional), often fucking up, working, hustling, doing the math, balancing bills, freaked out about money, talking with strangers and loved ones, eating, walking, fighting their inner critic, trying

their damndest to be brave enough to exist in public, some of us cruel, everyone taking their turn at being dumb lucky fools or stupid pieces of shit on occasion and all of us trying to get by, failing, succeeding, without doubt hurting someone in the process. It's okay, life is short and you're still alive, I told myself, appreciate the fact that you're above ground because death is forever.

Halfway down the block the weight on my chest lightened and was gone. I walked through the crowds and caught myself singing quietly. It took a moment to realize it was one of Andrei's songs. (A song that rhymed "castles" with "arseholes" and name-checked Oxford's Magdalen Bridge; though pronounced "maudlin" unlike the American "Mag dah len." The bridge was a spot I associated with the early days of coming out to England to tour before I knew a thing about the shit aspects of the world; before I thought—or rather cared—about my own security and wellbeing in any considerable sense.) I walked until the neighborhood changed to high-rise office buildings and featureless tower blocks then turned and walked back.

At a shop near the hotel, I browsed the aisles and picked out a bag of flatbread on discount for a pound, a 50p tub of red pepper hummus (because the label said "Island Johnsy's Hummus Co"), a jar of green olives, a banana, an orange, a can of stuffed grape leaves, a mini bottle of olive oil (this I planned to carry with me in my shoulder bag the rest of the trip), and a four-pound Spanish wine, a red—rioja reserva. That all tallied, I'd still have money for the train to the wedding the next morning. Beyond that I would leave the future to the future.

"Hello my friend," said the man behind the counter when I brought my basket up to pay. He was tall, broad as a refrigerator, and wore a stained white apron. His face, a few days unshaved, salt and pepper. Eyes, bloodshot.

"Hey. How's it going?"

"American?" he said, leaning back a little, hands at his lower back like it was sore.

I nodded a yes.

“Where from?” he said, taking a blue packet of Walkers Squares Salt & Vinegar from the counter between us and setting it gently in the crisps rack next to the cash register.

“California. I mean, originally. But I live in Kansas.”

“Ahh, you are not in Kansas anymore,” he said happily, wagging a finger in my direction like he was scolding me. I tried not to smile but I couldn’t help it. Back home the joke was old. Here it felt okay. “Home, home on the range?” he asked and made a circling motion with his hand prompting the next line.

“Where the deer and the antelope play,” I said.

“Ahhh, yes, good,” he said with pleasure. “You are here in London alone?”

“I am. Unfortunately.”

“What are you here for?” He began to scan my groceries. First the hummus. Then the olive oil.

“In London I’m here for—my friend’s wedding is tomorrow. But in England I’m here for a book tour.”

“A book tour? What do you mean by—” He stopped scanning, bottle of wine in hand.

“I write books.”

“Oh, yes. A book tour. A book tour. I understand.” He set the bottle of wine back on the counter. “My daughter and my wife they love to read. In school for me it was poetry but now? I work. Maybe someday I have time to read again. Would I know your books?”

This is the question you’re asked most often when you tell a stranger you write books. In the past I would sidestep or change the subject. But now people occasionally know the book that went viral last summer. I told him the title.

“I do not know. Maybe my daughter she know. My wife she love the *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I tell her—never mind what I tell her.” He laughed and made a swiping motion with his hand dismiss-

ing the thought. “My daughter is—she read Sally—Sally—R—Ra—something I cannot remember.”

“Sally Rooney?”

“Yes!” he clapped his big hands once like crashing a pair of cymbals together. “Rooney! That is who! I ask her why she wear such a stupid hat. My daughter she say, because Sally Rooney. Everything is because Sally Rooney, because Sally Rooney.”

An electronic bell dinged as a woman in black jeans, a shiny white angora sweater, and a dark brown head scarf walked in the door. The man said something to her I didn’t understand and it must have been good because she smiled and nodded and said, “Yes, Murad. We are. I thank you.”

“In London alone, in London alone,” he said quietly as if to himself then placed his hands on the countertop and leaned closer to me. “My friend. Listen. Tomorrow?” he said quietly, looking in the direction of the woman as she walked down the aisle and disappeared from view. “Tomorrow you come to my house and my wife she cook for you dinner.”

“I wish I could. Tomorrow’s the wedding.”

“Ahh, yes. The wedding of your friend. Tomorrow is the wedding.”

“Otherwise, yeah, for sure. I’d be honored.”

“Well. Tonight. Tonight you pay nothing for this food.”

“What? Do you—”

“Nothing.” He closed his eyes and shook his head emphatically.

“I mean—”

He took a package of Walkers Squares Ready Salted off the rack, stuck that in the bag too, then a chocolate bar from the display on the counter and said, “You take all of this and you have a nice meal and maybe—maybe you tell your friends about this shop—” he motioned toward the plate glass window and I saw “King Murad Market” backwards in yellow letters across

the front “—and they come here too when they are in London. What is your name? I will tell my daughter about your books.”

“James Bozic.”

“Bozic, it is a strange name.”

“It’s Serbian for Christmas.”

He laughed. “My friend you are very, very crazy! I like you.” He offered his hand and we shook. “James Christmas, I am Murad and now we are friends.”

I nodded. “Now we are friends. Thank you, Murad.”

“Now, go. Go have your dinner and think happily of tonight when you return to Kansas—” and as I walked out the door he shouted “—on the yellow brick road!”

Back in the hotel room I pulled off my boots and socks, sat cross-legged on the mattress against the headboard and spread the food out in front of me. Hummus and olive oil on the bread folded up with a few grape leaves inside. Good, cheap, dry red wine straight from the bottle. What a joy to be stopped in one place after moving all day. A joy to be eating well under the grace and care of King Murad in my safe, locked room courtesy of goodhearted Holmes-Phillips.

I ate and drank and with the hotel wi-fi I messaged Andrei, “Here in London.”

“How was the trip?”

“Ad astra per aspera,” I wrote.

“Good. Stars, adversity, all that. I was worried they chucked you out and sent you back to America.”

“Not yet.”

“Gold has been achieved.”

“Same as ever.”

Then I messaged Andrei a meme someone had sent me—a

photo of a scientist in a white lab coat with a clipboard in his hand and above the scientist the word “Biologist.” Next to the scientist a smaller version of the same man and that man was labeled “Microbiologist.” Next to the small scientist a black dot labeled “Molecular biologist.” I texted Andrei, “I’m the biologist. You’re the microbiologist. Your poetry is the molecular biologist.”

He texted back, “If this is a compliment, I agree. If it’s an insult, you’re a dead man.”

To Alison I wrote, “I’m stopped. Good room thanks to Jackson. Air-conditioner raging. Got food and wine. All is well.”

She replied, “Ah cool. Just got off work. About to drive to O.P. for class. I’ll call when I’m home.”

“Okay. I love you. Drive safe.”

To Frankie, “Hello from London. Tell me about the house hunt.”

To Willy and Johnsy, “Hi guys! I wish you were here! I miss you so much!”

I promised myself tomorrow would be a great day and that because I would be with my friends in this wonderful city no curse would dare touch me, under penalty of supreme annihilation.



I called the wedding hall “the Castle” as a half joke because certain Americans of a certain romantic nature will look at any stone building back home, and if the style of architecture seems old enough, will say in all earnestness something along the lines of, “Oh, wow. Look, it’s almost like a castle.” (On the farm I call the old grain silo in the lower acres “the Castle,” and while in town driving past any sort of stone church will remark on how living there would be like living in a castle.) Now, in England, or in any place where there are true castles, a stone building is just a stone building no matter how old or fancy. Which is not to say less of “the Castle,” with its sturdy, elegant,

gray walls traced with vining ivy and the turrets that set your mind imagining a different life from your own. In reality it was a “hall,” but I called it “the Castle” and was thrilled to be let in, as scruffy and dirty as I felt, and tried my best to play it cool.

In a shady corner of the Castle’s courtyard I stood under a tree sweating through my coat (a very old, size small captain’s jacket made of thin, soft, black wool with an indecipherable gold crest I’d found at an estate sale for a dollar) and talked with Rob Kobayashi. Rob, an Englishman newly divorced from his Japanese husband, was in the process of living it up in a way you seldom do in adulthood. Rob’s amorous, debauched nightlife is the sort of thing you might enjoy at twenty-one and stick with a couple years before it puts a strain on you and before you (often prematurely) begin to feel your age. Rob, instead, seemed (and maybe was, through some manner of irreligious transubstantiation) fifteen years younger than the last I’d seen him. He’d lost weight, put on muscle, begun to dress sharper and more glamorous, and wrapped up in the immediacy and busy social schedule of Pride month, possessed the air of both a man of carefree leisure (in a bohemian sense, not financially) and that of a mythical beast at the top of his food chain. There was a happy, reckless joy to the post-divorce Rob Kobayashi, and strangers at the wedding saw it (like you always see power in someone when it’s real) and gravitated toward him with his painted nails, open neck shirt with a short string of pearls, and the compact, stylish Japanese folding fan he held (and used; it was the right time for it). Talking with Rob among a small group of friends, I thought of Willy and Johnsy’s Pokémon cards; how the creatures would evolve to different, stronger versions of themselves after transcending a certain level. Rob seemed in a higher if not final form (like the sweet, cute Pokémon mouse who’d now grown golden wings and rake-like claws). You laugh with Rob more than you laugh with most people. His humor often involves statements presented apropos of nothing that nevertheless lead to good conversation and often biting social commentary. Hedonistic, careless, and untroubled as he is, Rob has a strong, knowledgeable progressive streak. It makes sense when seen in action and reminds you he is someone who cares very deeply and hates bigots, tyranny, and oppression. Rob’s humorous side both disarms that and serves to sharpen his eth-

ical code by way of contrast. He's what you (should) think of when you read the Emma Goldman bit about not wanting to be part of a revolution that has no dancing. On my end, I wouldn't want a revolution that doesn't have Rob Kobayashi.

Standing in the shade under our courtyard tree, on a second Pimm's cup (a summer punch made with fruity, spiced gin and carbonated lemonade) I said, "Rob, Andrei and Vika and I were talking about how you hate dolphins and we couldn't remember why."

"Never trust anything that's always smiling." Here he paused to light a cigarette. "They are—they're rubbery," he said with disgust before taking a drag then blowing the smoke upward. "They've got peg teeth. They're perverts. Dickheads like them. And they're fake friends."

"Oh yeah?"

"The sea is generally a bad time."

"What about whales? Don't some of them have smiling-ish faces?"

"Yes, but it's a gentle, loving smile not a mocking one. If dolphins are so smart why don't they have cheese? Or sci-fi or pigs as pets?"

"What's your stance on pigs?" I asked.

"I think pigs are pigs' business and leave it to them."

"Are there any worse animals than dolphins? Anything I should watch out for?"

He fanned himself once then shut the fan with a sharp click and tucked it under his arm. "I don't like two-toed sloths. Everything in the lobster and shrimp family is unforgiveable."

Then, from behind, a hand on my elbow and a mumbled interruption. "Sorry, it's—" I turned to see one of the wedding handlers, a stout, darkhaired, bearded man in a black suit with a white shirt and a shiny red tie "—sorry to, uh—you're needed in the registrar's office."

I was led into the Castle and brought to the registrar's office in a small back room with framed maps on the walls; the maps yellow with age and populated with intricate sea monsters, various takes on the compass rose, and Latin verse. On the one closest to me I saw a date in the corner—1512. "Awright, love," said the well-dressed older woman behind the desk. She pushed her glasses higher up on her nose and arranged a few sheets of paper into a stack then tapped their ends on the tabletop to get them straight. "Let's talk about your responsibilities during the ceremony, shall we?" The registrar told me about the cue I'd be given to leave my seat and stand near the bride and groom (and how far from them and in which direction to face while doing the reading). There were two quotes that would be read by friends of Jackson and Victoria, after which I would stand in front of the congregation, read what I'd prepared, then take my seat, and the final portion of the vows would commence. "The Do you takes and I do's and all," she said.

After leaving the registrar's office, I practiced my reading in the dining hall—a long dark wood room with a stage on one end and behind it a dramatic stained-glass wall depiction of (I was later told) the printer William Caxton, St. Cecelia (patron saint of music and musicians), Shakespeare (that one I knew), Biblical scholar William Tynedale (burned at the stake for heresy), and Archbishop Cranmer (also burned at the stake, also for heresy. Both were protestants, "—and *that* was why," a sloppy drunk BBC host told me later that night).

In the center of the hall stood two rows of heavy wooden tables taking up the length of the room like something you would find in a book where the hero is honored with a feast before a quest. Lining the walls in a strip that ran the length of the room near the top yet just shy of the ceiling were medieval shields of varying decoration—jousting shields I learned later—and at the end opposite the stage, a series of glass cases displaying jeweled goblets, short swords, and illuminated manuscripts (the latter left open to scenes of coronations, weddings, and funerals). I found a good place in the middle of the room and read the piece (on three sheets of paper I'd folded up in the side pocket of my captain's coat) and tried my best to get it down to memory.

Through the open door of the dining hall I heard a faint piano line repeated a few times where Jackson Holmes-Phillips' younger brother Reggie worked through the music he would play before the ceremony; and now (looking up in the direction of the sound) I saw in the doorway Jackson himself talking quietly with a pair of men in dark suits with the gold name plates the venue's staff wore.

Back to the pages, I read through the piece twice more then folded it up and tried to recite the selection from memory. I had the first paragraph down fine, but at the sentence that began, "You will love your friend and—" I was stuck with what came next and had to reference the pages.

Just then Jackson walked through the doorway into the hall.

"You alright, Bozic?" he called out to me, smiling, sweating a little at the temples, flushed-faced, obviously very happy. People call a wedding someone's "day." This is "your day," or "I hope they enjoy their day." You knew immediately when you saw them that this truly was Jackson's day and Victoria's day, their day, and you felt without doubt that both knew it and were enjoying the importance of the moment.

"I'm good!" I shouted across the room. "Gonna go over this 'til I don't have to read it."

"It's fine if you read it too," he said, smiling. "You'll do great."

"I hope so. I'm nervous."

"Ah, mate, what are you banging on about? You'll be fine. I'm so glad you're doing this."

"Thanks, Jackson."

Our voices echoed in the empty hall.

"Right! Keep at it," he said and went back through the doorway and was gone.

I thought for a moment of the last time I'd come to England and how Alison and I were so sick with pneumonia we couldn't get out of bed for weeks. We stayed at Jackson and Victoria's in

their summer cottage out back before the tour-dates then later for a week after we fell ill. On the final night in London (before we left to be sick somewhere else) we had Rob Kobayashi over and the five of us watched *Paddington 2* in the front room with a stack of marmalade sandwiches and a few bottles of wine and fell asleep halfway in, warm, fed, and happy; arranged about the room on couches and in deep chairs. I awoke to a scene where Paddington (falsely accused of course) had gone to prison and now wore a pink and gray striped uniform. Awake I saw the dark room and a few candles guttering on the table next to the dinner plates, and across from me my sleeping friends, and I couldn't recall being happier. On screen Paddington walked down the middle of the prison dining hall while his fellow prisoners looked over their shoulders at him. Jackson awoke and sat up from the couch. "How you feeling, mate?" he asked. "Good." "Good? Really?" "Good. But very sick still." "Poor little sausage," he said then settled back on the couch with the sleeping Victoria as Paddington approached the prison cook (played by Brendan Gleeson) and said, "Um, excuse me, Mr. Knuckles. I just wondered if I could have a quick word about the food."

Jackson Holmes-Phillips is one of the finest people I know in the sense that I can find nothing bad in him. I know that at my worst I can be judgmental, impatient, and ambitious to the point of hurting others. I know this and because I know this I try what I can to stomp out those tendencies when I see them (though I'm not always successful). All spring I'd been rereading Steinbeck, a lot of which I'd read as a child and didn't take in. Steinbeck's *Log from the Sea of Cortez* has a part that stuck with me as a kid and hit harder once read from an adult perspective.

I'd copied a section from the book in my to-do journal so I could check in with it when I needed and use it as a sort of map to get back to where I wanted to be. *Sea of Cortez* was written in 1941 as a collaboration with Steinbeck's close friend Ed Ricketts, a marine biologist and model for the character "Doc," in *Cannery Row* and its sequel, *Sweet Thursday*. The book documents a trip aboard a 77-foot fishing boat up the gulf bordered by the coastline of mainland Mexico and Baja California. The point of the trip—to collect specimens of marine animals then catalog

and preserve them. The book details what they found, but it's also a sort of philosophical treatise on the nature of people and animals and the ways in which people and animals are similar.

Copying the section down a few weeks before leaving for England I thought of Holmes-Phillips, his benevolence which feels like a sort of light, and you see that light in his presence—it's something in the eyes, as if he's lit from within.

Steinbeck writes: "There is a strange duality in the human which makes for an ethical paradox. We have definitions of good qualities and of bad; not changing things but generally considered good and bad throughout the ages and throughout the species. Of the good, we think always of wisdom, tolerance, kindness, generosity, humility; and the qualities of cruelty, greed, self-interest, graspingness, and rapacity are universally considered undesirable." Reading that I thought of my own bad traits, and I took stock. Which is something literature does for you at its best. It draws you in and requires of you a sort of self-reckoning. If its job is done well you come out changed. He continues, "And yet in our structure of society, the so-called and considered good qualities are invariable concomitants of failure, while the bad ones are the cornerstones of success. A man—a viewing point man—while he will love the abstract good qualities and detest the abstract bad, will nevertheless envy and admire the person who through possessing the bad qualities has succeeded economically and socially, and will hold in contempt that person whose good qualities have caused failure." Here Holmes-Phillips deviates from Steinbeck's model because he has been successful both in his career and socially by proving himself trustworthy, smart, and helpful. You couldn't call him a failure in any sense, but I know quite a few friends who, impelled by their kindness, ethics, and good hearts, stagger through one disaster after the next. A lot of the smartest, best people I know have had the hardest lives. Their sweetness gets them nowhere in a cutthroat world. Those like Holmes-Phillips are exceptions to the rule. The people (I won't call them friends and no one else should) with the hard, nonempathic, predatory eye toward their fellow creature—those whose desire for power over others informs nearly every decision—they are the ones who find success.

More from the *Log*, “When such a viewing-point man”—and here I think Steinbeck uses “man” in terms of “mankind,” regardless a dated usage that hits the modern reader wrong—“thinks of Jesus or St. Augustine or Socrates he regards them with love because they are symbols of the good he admires, and he hates the symbols of the bad. But actually he would rather be successful than good. In an animal other than man we would replace the term ‘good’ with ‘weak survival quotient’ and the term ‘bad’ with ‘strong survival quotient.’ Thus, man in his thinking or reverie status admires the progression toward extinction, but in the unthinking stimulus which really activates him he tends toward survival. Perhaps no other animal is so torn between alternatives. Man might be described fairly adequately, if simply, as a two-legged paradox. He has never accustomed himself to the tragic miracle of consciousness.” Perhaps there’s virtue in the progression toward extinction. By giving up, maybe we can change. Will those who defy the model that strives for self-benefit become the new, better model? Is a new model likely? Not if humankind keeps its current trajectory. But if we turn away from chasing power and success as a species might the new model exemplified by people like Jackson Holmes-Phillips rise? Any sort of awakening that leads to a paradigm shift of that magnitude will (or would) happen so gradually as to be unknowable. At least for now. Still, this last part in the quote gives me hope that some far-flung version of humanity might be better; small comfort though it is: “Perhaps, as has been suggested, his species is not set, has not jelled, but is still in a state of becoming, bound by his physical memories to a past of struggle and survival, limited in his futures by the uneasiness of thought and consciousness.”



After the ceremony Rob and I found our name cards at one of the feast tables and the serving began. Prosecco. Red or white wine. Beer or spirits if you wanted. The table settings had elaborate flower decorations as a centerpiece accented by piles of exotic fruit. Japanese pears next to white splashed purple orchids and pink dahlias. Bright red apricots (very soft and warm as if fresh off the tree) set in heaps of cut roses. Rob

and I ate fruit (no one else was) and cheered prosecco and wine and talked quietly then louder as the room filled up. To my right sat William Erlich from Andrei's band. If William left to get something, in his place would sit his brother Tim like a relay team and we talked happily in either situation. Tim—loud, boisterous, a big, roving, joyous hulk of a guy, the opposite of his slight, elfish, serious brother. Tim—sitting down, shouting, “Ey, bruv! You alright?!” clapping me on the back, hitting his drink against mine, offering me drugs and cigarettes, telling scandalous stories and jokes. Then William—back in his spot, “I miss anything? You alright, Bozic?” The food came in many courses, and we ate many courses and more table fruit (some I stuck in my coat pockets for later) and whenever Rob looked away to talk to his right-side neighbor or the girl across from him (both BBC people) I dropped the pits from my fruit in his glass of wine which he took with good humor.

After the meal, a four-piece band set up on stage in front of the wall of stained-glass and played British Invasion music. Mostly Beatles. Jackson Holmes-Phillips being a staunch and unapologetic Beatles fan amongst our music snob friends. Dancing in a circle, or rather dancing a bit but for the most part standing, vaguely nodding along to the music while talking with Rob and with William's Swedish wife Kerstin and Tim's tough-kid girlfriend Lisa, I noticed the bartenders had packed up and left dozens of wine bottles uncorked on the table.

“Be back!” I shouted over the opening verse of “It Won't Be Long” then worked my way through the crowd saying hellos and giving hugs to friends, singing to myself, “every night/when everybody has fun/here I am/sitting all on my own.”

At the table I moved the bottles around until I found a rioja and a dry white. Back on the dancefloor I handed Tim Erlich one of the bottles. “You young lord,” said Tim, who'd joined our group after some time in the restrooms with a few friends and a bag of coke. We passed the bottles around and some of us sang made-up lyrics to the songs and Kerstin and Lisa danced while they carried on a conversation about a friend of theirs who was mysteriously absent from the wedding and maybe it was because of a social feud or maybe they couldn't afford travel and *god* who wanted to travel in this bloody heat, anyway, said Lisa.

Just then I remembered the flower arrangements.

At our table I untucked my shirt and made a basket of the shirt ends and filled the basket with orchids and roses. Walking back to my friends I shouted “Flowers!” and tossed the flowers up in the air and they rained down on our heads. I picked some of them off the floor, shredded them into tiny bits and threw the shreds above us again. This began a trend and soon all of our friends and quite a few strangers carried handfuls of flowers back from the tables then the flowers were confetti in the air and the room smelled wonderful and below our feet the ruined flowers stained the ancient floorboards in slashed streaks of purple and vivid red.

William Erlich was nowhere to be seen.

“Where’s your brother?” I said in Tim’s ear.

“Buying more drugs of course.”

I laughed. “Of course.”

A few songs later, and after all the flowers made their way to the dancefloor to be trampled to pulp, I noticed William sitting on his own at the empty feast table looking at his phone so I danced over to him.

“Put down your phone! Dance!” I shouted.

He smiled at me (just barely—reserved, not showing his teeth) and shook his head.

“Dance you fucking coward!”

William set his phone on the table, picked up his beer to take a slow, deliberate sip to prove he wasn’t going anywhere, and in that moment, I bent down and grabbed his leg by the pant cuff and pulled him out of his seat.

William fell on top of me, knee hard to my foot and I rolled off to the side, pain rippling up my leg.

For a moment I flopped over onto my back and breathed in the smell of the crushed flowers; the bass humming up through the

floorboards into my spine. Time slowed. Stopped. The room went silent and I let myself go off into my head. Then William's voice broke me back out of it. "You hurt?" he said, standing above me, offering a hand. Like a volume knob turned back up, with his voice came the roar of the music and the noise of the room.

"I think you smashed my foot," I said as he pulled me up.

"Good," he said happily. "You brought it on yourself, you ridiculous fucking twat."

"Then at least dance," I said.

"Fiiine," he said, drawing the word out like it was in italics, playing at annoyance.

"Ha!" I shouted.

Not as a laugh but as a proclamation of victory.



Now Rob and I walking the streets of Crouch End down a seemingly endless hill past darkened houses and black, featureless wooded parks. Talking. Talking about what? The beginning of the walk to the wedding's afterparty is murky and what we spoke of is lost. What's left is a view of us as if floating above the scene, Rob and I walking a quick pace, talking, our faces serious. Night and shadows. Trees, stone walls, sidewalks, dark hedges and shrubs, street signs, the moon, a gray wash of sky with no stars. Then a house party with people from the wedding outside around a small, unused fire-ring in a yard surrounded by a garden wall and thick trees; a girl crying as she said, "No, I don't think I'm *able* to be loved is what it amounts to," and Rob telling her nice things about herself, and when she got up to do drugs in the house, Rob saying, "I've never met this girl, but she seems to believe all the nice things I've made up about her."

"You're very convincing," I said.

There were five of us outside now; the other three discussing a television series I hadn't heard of.

“Fuck’s sake,” said Rob. “I can’t believe I’m giving a peptalk to a complete stranger.”

“Should we go?”

“No, why? I love this.”

Behind us an above-ground pool glowed blue in the darkness.

“Is that thing heated?” I asked Richard, our friend who lived here. Inside the house, his girlfriend was mixing up a batch of cocktails for us. Some sort of rum fruit punch called “the Bleeding Eye.”

“England’s heated, mate,” Richard said and he and the other two sitting with him laughed.

Richard’s girlfriend came out the front door with a tray of drinks and said, “Now who wants to get properly fucked up?”

“Yes, please,” said Richard, raising his hand and bowing his head.

I got up and walked to the pool and stirred the surface of the water with my hand.

“It’s warm. Who’s swimmin’ with me?” No response. “Nobody? Come on.” I sat down on the ground, pulled my boots and socks off then got back up and took off my captain’s coat and folded it over the back of a wooden deck chair. “Rob? Richard? Swimming?” Nothing. “Come on, you guys. Seriously? No one?”

Without swim partners I gave up and walked back to the fire just as the crying girl sat down again and told Rob, “You’re a real friend. You know that? Not like the others.”

“Yes,” said Rob, “I’m well aware of being unlike the others” with an attempt to suppress a laugh. “I’m sorry I’m laughing. Life is funny.”

“Would you like some MDMA?” she asked Rob. “We have a bit left inside. It’s nearly gone. Now’s the time if you want—”

“No. Thanks, though,” he replied.

“Well, if you’re not, I suppose someone should,” said Richard, who got up, reached down and helped his girlfriend to her feet. “Right. Going inside. Don’t have too much fun without us.”

I sat down on the ground next to Rob.

“Are you from Australia?” the drunk girl asked me. “I would love to go to Australia. Your accent is nice. You must be Australian.”

“Yes, I’m from Australia,” I said.

“He is,” said Rob. “He’s a marsupial. Grew up in a pouch, of all places. How awful, right? A pouch? Just think of it.”

The girl nodded and was quiet for a moment then said, “Wait. You’re taking the piss.”

“We are,” I said. “But I am from Australia.”

“Cool,” she said, dabbing the corner of her eyes, the left then the right, with the sleeve of her shirt.

“You’ve stopped crying,” said Rob. “That’s something.”

“I suppose I have.”

“Job well done,” I told Rob.



At dawn we walked to Rob’s apartment; the morning gray and quiet, not a car on the road or a light in the row of grand old houses we passed.

“What’s the difference between a large house and a mansion?” I asked.

“If you’re setting up a joke you have to tell me in advance,” said Rob. “I’m far too fucked for this.”

“No, I mean it. Like—like at what—at which point is a large

house considered a mansion?”

“I suppose the difference between a large house and a mansion is—is maybe attitude?” he said with a sour expression. “Or perhaps degrees of evil. The people who live in that one—” he pointed at a shadowy manor off the road behind a tan brick wall. “Those are the rich you’re meant to eat when they say to eat the rich. These places... these people... and your beloved *Paddington 2*... not England at its best.”

I laughed. “What’ve you got against *Paddington 2*?”

“It comes across as quite twee and selling a kind of romanticized version of the past posh Britain to the overseas market.”

“I didn’t pick up on that at all.”

“Ultimately it’s a movie about posh people and I hate posh people. I guess it’s like a UK version of the over-sanitized Disney white picket fence thing. Bear in mind, no British people agree with me.”

“I feel like I wouldn’t—oh, haha, right. Bear. In mind.”

“Fuck I’m good,” he said.

“What a nice lazy morning,” I said as Rob stopped to light a cigarette. I leaned up against a lamppost and took the weight off my left foot which had begun to ache from the tumble on the dancefloor with William.

“Lazy morning?” He took a drag and blew the smoke to the side.

“I mean back home in—just about any city around this time the shops would be opening up, people would be—you’d see cars everywhere, people driving to work, getting coffee, walking dogs.”

“What, no. James, it’s—” he looked at his phone and did the sour expression again “—it’s 4:30am.”

“It’s 4:30?” I said. “No. It’s light out.”

“This time of year the sun’s up by now.”

“We that far north?”

“Far enough I suppose.”

“Seeing the sunrise feels like a defeat,” I said.

“Not as bad when you’ve been up all night.”

“Bad enough,” I said.

“Shall we then?” he said, arm held out in front of him as if welcoming me into an open doorway.

“We shall,” I said, and we continued walking, the gray easing to a flat, gloomy white.



At noon William Erlich and Kerstin came round Rob’s to collect me and we drove six long, hungover hours to the Serpent Church. William and Kerstin live in Ormskirk, a market town near Liverpool famous for its gingerbread. “Orms” is Old Norse for “serpent” and “kirk” comes from “kirkja” which is “church.” Serpent Church. I’d stayed in Ormskirk with William and Kerstin the last time I was here. Alison and I were still sick with pneumonia, though worse than we’d been the week prior at Holmes-Phillips’ where we’d watched *Paddington 2* in such a sweet, poor, sick glow. Alison and I spent seven days in bed in Ormskirk unable to do much of anything but read and feel pitiful and think of all the good things we were missing. One sick afternoon Alison read the history of the place to me off her phone. Ormskirk may have been founded by a Viking called “Ormr” (Norway is just 500-some miles away by land and sea). There’s a Roman pillar or possibly a stone hitching post you can visit in town, but neither William nor Kerstin knew where it was; and that was what I learned about Ormskirk during that sick week five years previous—Ormr, the unknown pillar or post, gingerbread, the Serpent Church.

Like a repeat of last visit I spent this one in bed; busted foot propped up on a stack of pillows. I tried to work on the man-

uscript—and did for brief lucid moments—but for the most part the pain washed out any good thoughts I had.

Unable to work I reread *The Odyssey*. What I liked best were the small bits of rest or solace Odysseus had between defeats. I wanted to feel that way as well—to be reminded I'd win again, despite my dumb misfortune, despite the curse which I now felt like a fool for joking about with Andrei. Of course I didn't believe in the curse, but I knew joking about it made it worse; that, real or not, you shouldn't treat a bad thing lightly. A good way to make a dangerous person or situation or idea more dangerous is to underestimate it. The fact that the curse was all in my head didn't make it any less true or powerful. (Sometimes the things we create can hurt us more than anything the outside world might throw at us.)

Homer's *Odyssey* has been a trusted friend for years. I carry it with me when I know I will be traveling lean or when I'm worried about paying my way through life or during a deep, black depression when the voice in my head howls about endings and finality or finding a quick way out. I had it in my satchel when I left home for the first time to live in Oregon with Frankie so many years before, and when I left home again to stay on the road. It was a friend in bad motels where I read it to drown out the shouting in my head and the sounds I heard through the walls. It was there when I felt so alien I was tortured by the strange dialects of my own language and every back alley had no end and was deathly.

There is also a thrilling escapism to the story—the Greek isles and rocky hills overlooking the sea. Homer's descriptions are sparse and because of that you fill in the rest. If you have ever watched the sunrise from your own fucked-life castaway vantage you can add your personal colors and tones to the text. A lonely beach in the story is lonelier if you have been to a similar place and if you have heard the roar of the surf which is its own sort of silence and if you know the shade of the dark sky graying to a clear morning. If well told and with detail, patience, and warmth, a tragic story is like a sad song that makes you happier having heard it. (Sylvia Plath, Elliott Smith, Cassavetes, they all do the same trick.) Tragedy or not, a good story that allows you to live within it as an offstage character can be a friend

nearly as well as the flesh-and-blood kind. You hold a sort of ownership over a book you love. It becomes personal in a way that's uncomfortable when you take a step back from it and realize it's not yours entirely. It belongs to everyone who has ever loved it and anyone else to come. I wasn't living through a tragedy now but I had before, which meant reading about Odysseus' own shit luck reminded me how well I had it—knocked down but safe with friends, cursed in some painful, minor sense yet still lucky. "Safe with friends" is what matters here. This is a celebration I'm writing. Months later. The week of Christmas now. Healed up at home on the farm missing friends and taking stock of things. Which has been the way I've gone for years. Live the thing then decide what it all meant. The pattern is: home and away. Go out and come back and tell about it. Growing up I loved *The Hobbit*. Off to a new place. Fun or trouble or pain. Then back home. Write your own *There and Back Again*. Away isn't away if there's not a home to return to. Home isn't as sweet unless you leave. My favorite version of *The Hobbit* is the Rankin/Bass cartoon from the 1970s. Of course it's not as good as the book, but I like it best because I was very young when I first saw it and sometimes what you come across early hits hardest and stays fundamental no matter how good it is. For me the songs were what made it last. "The greatest adventure is what lies ahead/today and tomorrow are yet to be said." "The man who's a dreamer and never takes leave/who thinks of a world that is just make-believe/Will never know passion, will never know pain/Who sits by the window will one day see rain."

Lying in bed in Ormskirk the pain worsened each day until it ran in hot flares from my toes up to my back teeth. With it came a fever, and in the grips of it, I read for hours. If I stayed still enough, the pain stopped for a while and then I was able to forget my stupid piece of shit foot. I looked for things to give me courage or distraction. In Camus I read, "What interests me is living and dying for what one loves." In *The Odyssey*, "Be strong, saith my heart; I am a soldier; I have seen worse sights than this." In Lawrence Durrell I read about his time in Cyprus in the 1950s during the Enosis revolt. The weather in it swept me up and let me forget about the pain: "The month or so of spring weather with its promise of summer to follow proved

fraudulent. One day we woke to a sky covered in ugly festoons of black cloud and saw drift upon drift of silver needles falling upon the ramparts of Kyrenia castle. Thunder clamoured and rolled, and the grape-blue semi-darkness of the sea was bitten out in magnesium flashes as the lightning clawed at us from Turkey like a family of dragons.” God that “grape-blue semi-darkness of the sea” and the description of lightning. Cyprus. The Mediterranean. As he described the place, I saw it and felt it and was there with him on the oceanfront, standing at the place where the promenade dropped off into the water, and smelled the sea air and the rain and the wet streets. “The stone floors turned damp and cold, the gutters brimmed and mumbled all day as they poured a cascade of rain in the streets. Below us the sea dashed huge waves across the front where not a week ago we had been sitting in shorts and sandals, drinking coffee and ouzo, and making plans for the summer.” It was like the El Niño storms I grew up with in San Diego and having experienced that made reading Durrell’s account even better. “It was a thrilling change, for one could feel the luxuriant grass fattening under the olives, and the spring flowers unwrapping their delicate petals on the anemone-starred slopes below Klepini.” I read those lines twice and copied them down in my to-do book to ingrain them into myself and capture some of that fragrant, earthy power when I was well enough to work again.

Mealtimes, I got up and hobbled to the dining room then lowered myself into a seat at the heavy wooden table with its fine view of the garden. The weather had changed—and this high north it was different to begin with. Gray skies. Rain in the afternoon. Warm the first day but colder as the week progressed. From the hill atop the city—the wind blowing the grass in rippling waves like a Miyazaki film—you could see Liverpool as a gray, leaden cluster in the distance; the construction cranes at the harbor, the great ships at port, and beyond that the sea like a hot silver sheet in the afternoon, rich yellow or blood-splashed gold in the dusk.

William Erlich can be a joyous tyrant when he’s on tour in a group of boys. But William and Kerstin together are quiet, reserved, and thoughtful. At meals we had quiet, reserved, thoughtful conversation about the festivals he was playing

with his new band and about the artist management company he and Kerstin run; how one of their clients who'd done the soundtrack for the most iconic arthouse film of the early 2000s was now touring by sailboat. While William talked I found myself swept up in the fantasy of a boat tour. What a difference from my own road-standard of endless drives, gas station food, and sleeping in the backs of cars. A boat tour. On a goddamn fucking sailboat, no less. The glamour—or at least the glamour I wrote into what William told me—felt cinematic, sweeping, unbelievable. I'm well aware of the romance I lump onto what I do. Mine is *Lonesome Crowded West* and Townes. It's a ragged, dogeared, often delusional romanticism (and romanticism by nature is delusional). I know how to enjoy it and how to use it to turn a hard day into (at least something resembling) an adventure. A sailboat tour has its own kind of high romance. Symphonic. Lavish.

William told me how the artist and his wife had left their passports on the French mainland and were now en route to an island festival they were booked to headline and would need the passports shipped to them before they could clear customs. We all have our work dramas no matter the level we're at. William's job that day was to fix the passport mistake. Laptop open on the dining room table, phone to his ear, he quietly set the wheels in motion and by day's end the passports were on the island ahead of the band.

On our own tours, William often served as fixer and logistical engineer just like Holmes-Phillips at the BBC. The first UK tour we did I flew from Portland to London with twenty dollars cash in my pockets, the record label having paid for my flight (my fees from shows would go to pay that back and I came home broke). William made those two weeks together easy and seamless as if we were traveling millionaires. Like with Holmes-Phillips, when you are around William Erlich you are in good hands. He's deliberate, attentive, and well-organized. The joyous tyrant tour-William is a different beast than the business-William. The fact that he can jump from one to the other is a testament to his depth of character. Neither is a pose or a false front.

When the pandemic hit England, William and Kerstin's man-

agement company was given a ten-thousand-pound stimulus check from the British government. But after William hired Kerstin on officially, it changed some small yet important fiscal designation and now they were asked to return the stimulus money. Which had of course been spent. Like everyone's stimulus money had been spent. No regard to the near impossibility of the proposition, the Crown demanded payment in full. No installments. No clemency. This among other social, economic, and political shifts in the post-EU Great Britain meant that soon they would have to leave England. Plan was Sweden. Full emigration. Long term. Be near Kerstin's family now that their toddler son Leo was old enough to travel. William and Kerstin's payback deadline loomed on the horizon, and we talked about that; how thanks to capitalism both our countries were becoming inhospitable for anyone except the upper middle class and rich. Still suffering the after-tides of Boris Johnson, Theresa May, and Donald Trump, we stood in the shadow of a wave as tall as the sky, rolling slowly to shore.

"Do you ever think of leaving?" asked Kerstin, refilling her glass with the bottle of wine. She pointed the mouth of the bottle toward my glass and raised her eyebrows as a way of asking if I wanted more, and when I said something like "Mm hmm" she topped it off.

"Do I think of leaving the States?"

She said yes with a nod. Often William and Kerstin say yes or no (or ask or answer basic questions) nonverbally. A side-to-side movement of the hand. A tilted chin. Raised eyebrows.

"I've thought about it," I said. "A lot." I rubbed the last piece of bread crust in the streaks of olive oil on my plate. "If it wasn't for my god-sons Willy and Johnsy I might. Or if I had enough money to come home when I wanted."

"Leo. You had enough food, mate?" asked William in a soft, higher voice, wiping a bit of apple sauce from their boy's little merry face.

"Ja," said Leo.

"But moneywise it can't happen?" asked Kerstin.

“Moneywise. At least for now.” I pushed my plate away from me. “And maybe it won’t ever be—an option, I mean. I’d have to be making—so much more than I am now.”

“How much?” asked William quietly.

“Double maybe? I haven’t done the figures. I’m afraid to. At least for the time being I can live well in the country in Kansas off book sales and tour money without a day job. I’m doing fine but on the very edge of not. Now could I do the same back home in San Diego or—or any decent city? Absolutely not. And overseas? I can’t imagine it.”

“Don’t sell yourself short,” said Kerstin.

William nodded a yes.

I thought of King Murad’s daughter and Sally Rooney. A hit was what I needed. Something like Sally Rooney. What would a hit mean for me? Moneywise it would need to be something beyond the last book’s viral months. Something lasting. I stared out the glass sliding door separating the dining room from the garden while William and Kerstin talked quietly about their plans for tomorrow and thought of what writing a successful mainstream book might mean. Money. An easier path through life. The freedom to go where you want when you want. Different problems. Bigger debts and bills. Money of course makes some problems go away while allowing space for new ones to form. Last year during the book’s viral moment I made more money than ever and spent it just as fast. When you’re a kid you eat smaller portions than when you’re an adult. As you grow, so do your needs. It’s so natural you don’t see it happening.

The sun slipped behind the black wall of trees bordering the garden. The light outside—dark emerald, silver.

The room darkened.

“Shall I light some candles?” asked Kerstin. William nodded and made an “Mm” noise and she got up and walked into the kitchen carrying Leo’s little supper plate.

“I’m excited for you guys to move to Sweden,” I told William.

“When we’ve moved and settled in you should come visit,” said William. Then before I could answer “—and be sick or injured with us in a new country.”

We laughed and I said, “Well, at this point it’s tradition.”

“And why break with that?” said Kerstin, sitting down across from me. She set a pair of short, thick, white candles in the middle of the table, took a match from a small black and red cardboard box, struck it against the side of the box, and lit the first wick then the second.

The immediate area around us lightened with a warm orange glow. I looked at my friends’ faces across the table—their fair hair catching the light with tones of gold and straw, their happy boy Leo sitting in his highchair between them—my good, quiet, smart friends—and a profound joy rose in my chest, overtaking me, then tears blurring my vision.

“You know the first time I remember hearing—” I cleared my throat “—hearing anything about English people was—it was in first grade,” I said, starting a story in order to push away the intensity of my feelings. “A very rich girl in our class lived in a beautiful steel and glass mansion right on the cliffside at the northern end of Pacific Beach with a vast, sweeping view of the sea. On a clear day you could see the San Clemente Islands in the distance. The Gesas family. Amber Gesas. Which—” I took a sip of my wine “—which she was teased about a lot when we were kids because half our class was Mexican and her name sounds like the word ‘hamburgers’ in Spanish.” William smiled and Kerstin laughed without a sound while refilling our wine. “The ‘h’ is silent in ‘hamburguesas.’ So, Amber Gesas, Ambur Guesas. On Thursdays, which was burger day at our school, the kids would chant ‘Amber Gesas! Eats hamburguesas!’ when she walked through the cafeteria with her tray. It got so bad she brought her lunch on Thursdays even though she, like everyone else, loved burger day. That didn’t help. No matter what she brought for lunch the chant remained.”

“Did you join in?” asked Kerstin.

“In the chant?”

She nodded.

“I did. I’m not proud of that. But yes. I mean I did worse. Most kids do.” I touched the top of the candle closest to me and felt the wax edge bend in slightly then tried to push it back into place. “The point of this is—Amber’s family vacationed overseas on the longer school holidays. After a Christmas break trip to England she told us English people all say, ‘Ottendy pottendy doo’ as a way of greeting each other.”

“Which is of course true,” said Kerstin, and we laughed.

“She even had this... this, like, dance that went along with it where she held her arms straight down at her sides and waddled around like a penguin. Waddling around saying, ‘Ottendy pottendy doo. Ottendy pottendy doo.’ As a kid I was like, English people must be crazy as shit.”

“What’s the first thing you remember hearing about the Swedish?”

“Mate, don’t say the Swedish Chef,” said William.

I tried to think of anything else but the Muppet chef.

His tall white hat.

His red bowtie and floppy, spasmodic human hands and extravagant mustache and eyebrows.

The Swedish Chef cooking too fast, running on the edge of mania, frantic, out of control, shouting, “Bork, bork, bork, bork!”

I couldn’t think of anything else. He was what I first knew of the Swedes.

I shook my head and William said, “No, mate.”

“The Swedish Chef,” I said.



At the end of the week I went south, stopping first in town to

get x-rays at an NHS clinic, and was given a terrible knee-length plastic and Velcro boot for my broken foot. Then taxi to bus station and a six-hour wait until my reunion with Andrei (at which point we'd catch a bus to Exeter to make our next reading). Six hours in Liverpool's city center—cold and blustery, rain all day as I limped in and out of mall stores looking for a new hat to reverse my luck.

The rain streamed in gray-white sheets off the canvas awnings of the department stores, restaurants, and boutiques. With the worst thoughts I had I tore myself apart for being in this position to begin with—stuck wandering the malls like some shitty wet ghost, hobbling from one shop to the next with the damn plastic boot like a pirate's pegleg, still hating myself over the hotel scam, wracked with self-pity, and when you feel pitiful, people see you as pitiful—or worse, a threat, staggering wretched in public places. You fool. You pitiful feeling-sorry-for-yourself fool. I walked through sliding doors and past gold and glass perfume counters and into sports shops where all the hats had teams on them or Nike logos, the hat bills pre-weathered with little tears made by machines. You dipshit. You dunce.

Giving up on lucky hats I decided to get souvenirs for Willy and Johnsy. Willy asked the day I left Kansas, "Would you get me English tea so I can drink it and feel dignified?" God. Of course I could. This poor twelve year old kid who'd been through so much with the exodus from Michigan and more unwelcome change than anyone should face, wanted a simple box of English tea to feel dignified while drinking. Fucking hell. Fucking sad, painful world and sad, painful us shuffling through it, wanting and hoping, caring and trying, and what do we get in return? Suffering. Ache. Our sweetest, most innocent, closest-held dreams smashed like a dinner plate on the floor (and broken so badly you can't stick it back together with all the Crazy Glue in the world). God of course a box of English tea. I couldn't not, or what was I? The first night in Bristol I brought Andrei in on the plan and he told me I had to buy Willy a box of Yorkshire tea if I wanted to get him the most English of teas. Letting Willy down was not an option.

Johnsy wanted a Terry's Chocolate Orange. Just like me, Johnsy loves to eat. He talks about food. Obsesses over it. Asks for

very specific things. The giant plastic tub of cheese puffs they have at Tractor Supply. A particular garlic cheddar he had in Bend with Jude and hasn't been able to find since. The Greek fig jam Alison buys online with its pipe tobacco scent (she calls it "cigarette jam" to be funny). Johnsy has a sweet tooth and a spark in his eyes when you offer him candy. So a chocolate orange? Easy. But the mall had nothing. No tea. The only chocolate oranges they sold had popping candy in them. No hats, no luck, no tea, no chocolate oranges. Were the pain not blotting out my usual sense of reasoning I would've been confident that the next town, the next train station, back in Bristol, London before leaving, Heathrow gift shops, any of those would pay off with as much Yorkshire tea and as many chocolate oranges as I could carry. But on this sullen, miserable, chilly morning, the rain pissing down, it was pain and fatalism that won out. I gave up and walked across the street to the bus station.



Andrei arrived full of jokes and insults about my broken foot and the stupid-looking boot and within minutes we were happily walking together to our coach stop. The bus to Exeter was packed with people listening to music on their phones and shouting above the noise of the engine just like the Greyhound back home. Kids played games on their tablets at full volume. The stale, humid air in the bus smelled like greasy chips and mayo, vinegar, fried fish. Andrei and I, sitting in aisle seats opposite each other because we couldn't find a bench together, tried our best to talk over the noise. After the quiet, wet, cold day at the Liverpool station, the clamor and stench of the bus felt like renewed life—a smeary, crammed, jumbled, sweet mess.

The owners of the café we were scheduled to read at had promised as much food and wine as we wanted. Andrei and I talked about that—the food, the wine, the endless supply ahead. "I'm going to be a fucking pig," I said, "I'm going to be Peppa Pig and eat the whole place then run out into the streets and eat the entire fucking city." As the bus neared Exeter it felt as though we were in the hull of Ormr's Viking ship sharpening our axes as we sailed away from the Serpent Church toward battle—but a battle we knew we would emerge victorious from after hack-

ing our way through ten thousand armies then chopping off the head of the enemy king and sticking it with maximum gore effect on the world's tallest pike for all to see. Like, take heed, fools. Here is a warning. Here is the head of your stupid king. Fuck with us at your own peril. Peppa Pig will knock down your walls and eat your town.

We tried our best to tell the worst jokes we could come up with—the meanest insults about each other's clothes and writing. The most flippant, snide observations about the world around us we could muster. None of it serious. The jokes went from awful to wholesome because I couldn't stand to be awful that long, but as soon as they were wholesome Andrei swerved them back to awful. Andrei told me that my "serious face" made it look like I'd been holding a shit in all day. I told Andrei that I had to pay the event organizers five hundred pounds to put him on the bill because they thought his writing felt "academic." After someone walked past us to their seat wearing a garish, oversized black t-shirt with art depicting the stupid looking CG centaurs from *Harry Potter* plastered across the front in vivid colors, Andrei leaned across the aisle to me and said, casually, "You know, I used to be a centaur."

"Oh. I didn't know that about you."

"It's true," he said, settling back into his seat, looking at his phone, pretending the conversation was over.

"What happened?"

"What happened in what sense?" he asked with an innocent tone to his voice, eyebrows raised a little.

"Why aren't you a centaur anymore?"

"Oh, that. I had a horsterectomy."

"Oh my god, you should—don't ever tell anyone that joke. That's horrible, Andrei. You're a bad person. I'm canceling you as soon as we have wi-fi. Remind me to cancel you."

He laughed his dry, wicked laugh. "Centaur's are funny though, right?" he said. "I wonder why centaurs are always horses. Why

not cat ones? Bird centaurs. You would be a tapeworm centaur.”

“You would be a maggot centaur,” I told him. “But I would be a rhino one. Imagine the damage you could do as a rhino centaur. Look out world. Rhino centaurs. Here they come.”

“Horsterectomy,” he said again, laughing. “It’s well good. What if we had a business called Horse Direct to Me?”

“Like a horse selling business?”

“You order horses from the comfort of your own home,” he said.

“We’d be rich as hell and we could buy everything, is what would happen.”

The seatmate to my left, a small, bleach white, shriveled, bald man, listened to techno on his phone while violently drinking from a quart carton of Ribena fruit juice he kept in a shopping bag at his feet, held between his comically oversized shoes. (Later we decided he looked like an early version of the drummer from Andrei’s last band; that after they made this one they decided it wasn’t good enough, tossed it on the misprint pile, and began again. Somehow the misprint version crawled off and wound up on this bus with us.) When the songs reached their speedy, euphoric, amped-up peak, he would dance in his seat, arms up above his head, wrists turning as if he held glowsticks in his hands. Andrei stared side-eyed at me joyously and I stared side-eyed joyously at Andrei and everything was stupid and wonderful and hilarious.



The café was at the cul-de-sac end of a glass-topped shopping center courtyard. After we checked in with the promoters, and before we sat down to eat as much food and drink as much wine as we possibly could, I went next door to a clothing shop and bought a hat with the shop’s logo, a terrible-looking hat, but I told myself it didn’t have to look cool. The lucky Basin Valve Company hat wasn’t cool. This one would do at least to reset my luck until I found something better. I bent the bill to

be less flat and used a piece of broken glass I found on the ground to break the stitching of the company's logo and pull it off. The hat went on my head and we sat down, and with hearts full of greed, ate a glorious three-course meal at Exeter's finest café in the spirit of Ormr and Peppa Pig.

Andrei and I did our reading then posted up behind the merch table with one last bottle of red wine and two final plates of the café's excellent food. Eating, drinking, I told Andrei tonight we were defenders of the Serpent Church and proprietors of the famous horse delivery service Horse Direct to Me, which of course meant we had the best horses to ride into battle and if those horses didn't pass the test we could turn them in for new ones any time we'd like.

"Having a lot of horses is the sign of success for a warrior," I said between bites of strawberry cheesecake. "So many horses you end up giving them away to strangers. You walk down the street and you're like, 'You look like you need a horse. Here's one.' On and on as you ramble through town. 'Want a horse? Good. Here's a horse.'"



The crowd cleared out and the shop owners began to stack the chairs and wipe down the tables. I packed up my books except for the last copy I had with me of one of my older books because a short, shy girl wanted it, as did a tall, shy boy. It was a standoff, and a plan formed in my head.

"Andrei, listen," I said then leaned close and whispered the plan like you do in movies where the audience doesn't hear what's about to happen but knows they'll see it soon enough and that the wait will be worth it because a bad plan isn't worth whispering about.

When the girl went off to pay her tab I told the boy, "Look. Buy the book. Then when she comes back tell her that once you're done reading it you'll give it to her and—I mean, you like her, right?"

"Yeah," said boy, staring down at his shoes. "She's—"

“You like her,” said Andrei.

“I do.”

“And I think—no, it’s obvious, it’s obvious she likes you and—okay, here’s what you do, you tell her when she comes back she can have the book once you’re done with it. You guys meet up to hand off the book and have a coffee or a beer or see a movie or something. Then you get married and—” the boy laughed and Andrei did too “—and we’ll be the wedding band—” I made a single downstroke motion like I’d strummed a guitar “—and we’ll all live happily ever after, the end, goodnight, amen.”

“Deal,” he said. He took out his wallet, opened it carefully, and handed me a twenty-pound note.

I gave him a ten from the small stack of cash in front of me and said, “You have chosen wisely.”

The boy picked up the book and turned it over to read the back while I counted out the money we made. It was a good take.

“It’s a good take,” I told Andrei as I counted.

“Be back. Don’t miss me,” he said then got up and walked to the café’s bar.

Just then the short girl was back and stood next to the tall boy and asked about the book.

The boy held it up and smiled, embarrassed, happy, awfully shy.

“I bought it,” he said.

“While I was away? How dare you?” she said, flirting shamelessly.

“I, uh—” the boy stammered, his cheeks flushing red.

“Katy, it’s Katy, right?” said Andrei, sitting down again, new bottle of wine in hand. “You and—” he looked at the boy.

“Charley,” said the boy.

“You and Charley are now co-parents of this James Bozic

book. Once Charley has a go, it'll be yours. You two will meet up. Have a drink or a meal. Exchange the book and romance will flower." With this, Andrei spread his hands out slowly like a flower blooming and the girl and the boy and I laughed.

I leaned back in my folding chair until it rested against the wall behind us, and said, "Then years later—many, many years, you will speak of this fateful, heady night at this lovely café and how Andrei and I teamed up to facilitate your love and what a—"

"—what an *origin story*," said Andrei, unscrewing the actual final bottle of wine he had just asked the promoters for. "What a tale to tell."

"A whale of a tale," I added with a nod.

"A whale tale. Go fucking—go fucking tell a whale. What are we even talking about?" Andrei said, then drank from the bottle, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "Good wine, this."

"Here," I said. I reached for the bottle and took it and handed it to Charley. "That's yours now."

"Mate," said Andrei.

"He deserves it," I said. "Now, Katy, you get this—" I took off the new lucky hat and handed it across the merch table to her. "—so you don't go home emptyhanded. This is yours now."

"James, what, no," said Andrei. "Your lucky hat."

She put it on backwards. "How do I look?" she asked the boy.

"Good," he said quietly, eyes cast down to his shoes again. "You look—good."

"Now it's your lucky hat, Katy," I said. "My luck is restored and I can give the hat away without invoking the curse again."

"You are absolutely fucking mental," said Andrei.

"I know," I told him, trying my best to say "I know" like Han Solo in *The Empire Strikes Back* right before he's dropped into

the carbonite and made into something like a statue but also a door.

After they left, walking out together, I turned to Andrei and said, “I don’t know about you but I feel fucking incredible.”

He nodded. “Pair of proper matchmakers here.”

“Matchmakers is right,” I said. “Matchmakers fiddling on the fuckin’ roof.”

“We should go before we wear out our welcome,” he said.

“It’s worn,” I said.

“We’re being tyrants, aren’t we?”

“Yes.”

We asked for one final bottle of wine— “Really the last one this time, thank you, you guys are so nice, so generous, thanks so much for having us” —and got a couple more plates of unbelievably good food, and sat down and enjoyed them thoroughly.

Later, while Andrei packed up, I scrolled through my phone and saw an Instagram message from the boy.

“Oh shit look at this.”

“What.” He sat down next to me behind the merch table.

I showed him my phone and said, “The message from @lotus-boy090102. I’m assuming that’s Charley.”

“Looks like.” He read it aloud, “‘Katy and I went for a pint then wandered around a park together and rode the swings. We’ve got a date to meet up next week once I’m done with your book. Thank you so much.’ Write him back and—” Andrei handed me the phone. “—and say, ‘Invite us to the wedding and name your kids after us and that’s all the thanks we need.’ Write that.”

I took the phone and began to type.



On the train ride home to Bristol we had the car to ourselves. Very drunk, overjoyed to have an empty car, I ran limping up and down the aisle shouting, “Owned! Owned! Owned! Owned! Owned!” and smacked the seatbacks with the palms of my hands to correspond with each “Owned.” Out of breath, I plopped down across from Andrei who’d just opened one of the beers we got as a last gift from the nice café owners.

“We own the train,” I said happily. “It’s owned.”

He set his beer on the table between us. “Here, listen,” he said, slurring a little. Then played “What’s Up?” by 4 Non Blondes on his phone and held it in my direction, and we began to sing along.

When the song ended, we played it again and sang, louder this time.

“And so I cry sometimes/When I’m lying in bed/Just to get it all out/What’s in my head/And I, I am feeling/A little peculiar” —then louder— “And so I wake/In the morning/And I step outside/And I take a deep breath/And get real high” —at which point we screamed from the top of our lungs— “And I scream/From the top of my lungs/WHAT’S GOING ON?!”

As the song ended for the third time, the train slowing to a stop, Andrei whispered, “Over there. Over there,” and I stood up and turned about-face with a jerk because of my booted leg to see a terrified-looking man in a business suit peering at us from behind his seat. “He’s, like, *fuck*,” said Andrei and I let myself drop sideways onto the row of seats, laughing, rolled over onto my back, and stared up at the ceiling above us, the lights of the station passing as we slowed, and I knew my luck had returned.



*Soleus Stretch*



You are  
doing a good job

*PART  
THREE*

Concerning the Garden, the Nazi Boat, the Graveyard Chase,  
the Federales, and the Birthday Party

How you got to the garden is you entered the house street-side and from there went along a narrow hallway and down a flight of stairs to the kitchen and lounge—a large, comfortable, low-ceilinged, single room set below earth level. Bordering the far end of the lounge stood a wall of glass doors you opened in separate folding panels, the mouth of which framed a view of the garden and gave the kitchen and lounge a warm, natural light at all hours of the day. The open space left by the glass doors made for a nice sunny spot where Andrei would sprawl out on a light green mat and read while I wrote in the garden; the first tier or terrace of which comprised a grassy patch with a wooden table then the next two tiers rose up and away from the house like a wide set of stairs until they reached the back of the garden. Walled high on three sides, bordered by the open entryway of the house on the fourth, you felt enclosed and safe from the wind and any unwanted attention you might get from neighbors besides those in the second story windows of the row houses that stretched up the hill (turning slightly with the curve of the road then out of sight). On the tiered levels and along the stone garden walls were pots of herbs, stray shovels and rakes, and piles of building material (bricks, light gray cinder blocks, plastic wrapped stacks of tar shingles). Scraggly flowers with yellow and white faces grew up from the grass as did young tomato plants, soft green and too small for fruit. Next to a pair of empty terra cotta flowerpots, a sun-warmed bag of garden soil sat slumped forward in the middle like someone asleep sitting up. (“Or shot in the chest,” offered Andrei. “Look at the hole in the front. Soil poking out. He’s been shot. He’s dead.”) Next to the wooden table on the first terrace I set up a large canvas parasol (the dark red color of raspberries) and at that table I spent each day working on the book; Andrei lying in the sun like a cat in the open doorway reading or writing in a notebook. We rarely moved except to eat. Andrei made us breakfast and lunch. Always with fresh herbs—cilantro, basil, parsley, oregano. Something Greek or toasted bread with mashed-up avocado and a pile of diced tomatoes like my first morning here.

Ever since the lean early days when I first moved out to the country, my day began with work and I did that at a relentless clip until at some point I gave up and ate my one meal

of the day. This new unhurried pace felt right. Reading more. Sitting in the sun. Thinking through my plans. Good, long, slow meals. Discussions with the sprawled-out Andrei about what our shared friends were or weren't doing and what we hoped the future would hold (beyond getting our books published we both wanted to adopt a puppy by the end of the year). Then I wrote and when I wrote I did it faster and went deeper psychologically and felt glad with what I'd done. Routine established, I worked slower but better and got more done, and ended work each day at a decent hour before settling in for the night. Back home settling in for the night happened very late and often after ten or twelve hours writing and endless clerical work surrounding the business of it. Settling in for the night in Bristol began at dusk. Vika would return from her studio with a bottle or two of dry white wine and the work would stop. ("Vika comes down the stairs with a blue plastic grocery bag," I wrote in my notebook. "She pulls two bottles of wine from the bag and sets them on the kitchen counter. Black labels. Black screw-top caps. Pale gold wine. Or lion gold," which I might've got from reading Durrell. "She looks at her phone before setting it on the counter and says something I can't hear to Andrei who's now come down the stairs with a stack of books in his arms. Andrei sets the books on the counter then opens the fridge and puts the first bottle in followed by the second. Vika heads back up the stairs and Andrei follows.") I'd never liked white wines. Growing up, red wine was what our heroes drank. Red wine was bohemian, punk, literary. It was 1950s North Beach, and it was '70s New York, train kids, and Jawbreaker. White wine was for our parents. It was to "relax" while red was to dredge up spirit and daring. But here with Andrei and Vika, white wine felt like the sunlight that filtered through the garden over the stone walls. It was like the warmth in your blood after being outside all day and the essence of a quiet summer as the scattered clouds crossed the sky. If Vika stayed late at the studio, I strapped on the awful plastic boot and limped off to the grocers down the hill and came back with wine (and when I felt sapped from all the sunlight and air—a carton of white grapefruit juice, bitter and refreshing). Then began the night. A good meal around the table after they put their boy René down for bed. A platter of bhaji fried up with fresh vegetables from the shop or pasta with the garden's herbs. We talked about everything on Earth

until late and took Polaroids of each other looking hilarious and serious and lethal, and soon Andrei and Vika were with me on Central Standard Time. Which meant off to bed at or after the 4:30am dawn and sleeping late into the day.

Andrei and Vika both worked from home on separate PhD programs. He explained his to me the night I arrived; how his research involved the potential in poetry as a tool for climate action. He used words like “Ambient Eco-Poetics” and “post-humanism,” and talked about “the politics of listening.” What it boiled down to is he’d been funded to write poetry, and did so at his own leisure.

Andrei’s work is potent, living, and gloriously baroque. He writes beautifully and with purpose; his sense of craft flawless yet never at the expense of feeling. It’s thunder and lightning with a heart, a conscience, and a brazen will bordering on the pugilistic. (Like William Erlich of the Serpent Church, Andrei is a joyous tyrant. But where William’s devilry is rare or at least confined to specific climes, Andrei’s is always at the fore. He’s a beast and has a good time with it, and never hurts anyone who doesn’t deserve or welcome it.) I slept in Andrei’s writing room with its small guest bed (a mattress on the floor) along the streetside wall and a series of large windows blacked out by sheets of painted plywood you could take down if you wanted to let the light in. Along the wall opposite the bed, stacks of books were piled up knee high. In the corner, its back to the door, was Andrei’s writing desk. I’d arranged my luggage on the dark blue painted hardwood floors in front of a small, unused Victorian fireplace in a tidy row with the red handheld suitcase full of my books to sell at readings and next to that my Brendan Tours shoulder bag (an ‘80s travel company relic made of firm, sturdy tan and brown nylon) and inside that my manuscript and a few books. Next to the Brendan Tours bag—my black, half-length, ankle-zip cowboy boots I couldn’t wear thanks to the broken foot and with those a pair of low top Converse All Stars (also black), one of which I’d wear to the shops as partner to the medical boot. (In the house I went barefoot.) Next to the shoes—the green and red box of Taylors of Harrogate Yorkshire tea I’d found at a shop in Bristol the day after my luck returned and Johnsy’s chocolate orange in its happy blue and

gold box. I felt at home in Andrei's writing room with its assortment of artifacts—Turkish brass knuckles, a very sharp dagger with a curved blade, his father's wristwatch with Arabic dates, cufflinks with the crest of his surname, a piece of green agate, a tiny ashtray shaped like a shoe—and slept well and deep and woke up rested. So, in the protective ring of Andrei and Vika's world, I settled into a schedule I decided I would keep back home—breakfasts fresh from the garden, reading a little, making my to-do list, then book work, followed by a good lunch, outside if able. That was important—to not be kept indoors all day breathing stale air. Meals outside. Work outside. Then dusk and an end to work. That quiet period between work and sleep is where the true good happens. You should work all you want if it's something you like, but at some point you need to enjoy the rest that your work has earned. Capitalism had quickened our step the last few years and we ran to meet its demands, but you can only be relentless for so long before things fall apart. Smart money's on those who know when to say when.



At the dinner table in the lounge I talked about the stories I tried to put in the book but couldn't write well enough. I didn't tell the stories themselves; I attempted to explain the telling and how eventually I would need to give up those stories and set them aside as memories. The Nazi boat was the first of them. It began like this—as a teenager in Costa Rica I swam out into the bay of a fishing village we'd just got to after a long, sweaty drive through the jungle. I remember the dusk and the smooth water as colorful as stained-glass with the orange and blue reflection of the sky, and I remember the stillness and the deep silence. In each attempt I wrote about the crescent-shaped cove behind me and the rows of white fishing boats pulled up to the dark sand and the small houses tucked back in the banana groves and beyond that the jungle. I wrote about how I swam to a small white boat anchored in the middle of the bay and held onto the side, out of breath from the swim, chest heaving. When I opened my eyes, once my heart slowed, I saw before me a dark red swastika painted on the side of the boat with a thick black circle around it and a line of German words below the circle in

gothic script.

I tried to make this a story two books ago, adding a scene with a meal a few hours later in a three-table restaurant that was also the home of a very old German man who cooked our dinner and served as waiter and cashier. I remember the town as being (in someone else's words; the source of the information now forgotten) "mostly German," but I'm uncertain whether that memory is correct or if the restaurant was from another fishing village a week or two later. (There was in fact a "German town" somewhere on the Caribbean coast or in the jungle, but where that was is lost to me.) I made another attempt, adding an event to the story (or rather two events, depending upon your definition of the word) that served as a prelude to set the tone of the piece. The event (or events) took place on the way to Costa Rica. We had been forced to land unexpectedly at a military base in Honduras because of engine trouble. Upon disembarking the plane, our passports were taken away by a man in uniform wearing sunglasses and a cap like what you think of when you think of "a General" (it seemed like a cliché even then). A group of soldiers (young men or teenagers) stood behind and around him in not completely matching fatigues, holding a variety of military weapons, outdated shotguns, and bolt-action deer rifles. After our passports were taken, the whole group of us was loaded onto a white bus then we were driven through the jungle to a government hotel to await the next flight. I remember the hotel as something out of a dream. Beyond the hotel lobby, through a wide hallway lined with gold framed mirrors, stood a towering glass dome filled with jungle trees and small black monkeys that leapt from branch to branch. Taxidermied white tigers reared up snarling on either side of the brass art deco entrance to the elevator, teeth bared, roaring, ferocious (and of course silent). There were other animals in the lobby on display like safari trophies. A gloriously maned lion on a platform surrounded by realistic-looking jungle grass with a series of café tables and chairs around it. On prominent display by the concierge station, a tall glass case with a bald eagle hovering above the ground suspended by wires—talons curled, wings spread, and below it in the carefully arranged square of prairie, a small gray mouse cowering in fear (and what an awful way to spend eternity, frozen in eternal simulation of the moments preceding

a fictional version of your death). Down another hallway—a glass-walled dining room with tropical plants and waiters in black and white serving champagne to men and women dressed in evening wear. We planned to drop our bags in the room then swim in the pool but instead took the elevator back down from our floor to the small café next to the restaurant because my mother was hungry. Meanwhile, as we ate, at least for the brief (I imagine instantaneous) moment the two events aligned, the people in the pool were killed—shocked to death by a short in an underwater pool light. We saw the bodies pulled from the water after our meal. There was a girl my age in a yellow bikini. Two older men in dark swim trunks. All three from our flight. Then the security guard who'd jumped in to save the girl. (The victims, thrashing in the water, must've looked as if they were drowning. The thought of that poked at me for months.) The stories of the Nazi boat and the government hotel when I think of them so many years removed seem like a newspaper page held up to the light. You see the words facing you, but you also see the words on the reverse side of the page and because of that the message is incomprehensible. I was sixteen and my memory of the timeline and location is shaky to say the least. Was the pool incident at the government hotel in Honduras or was it the next day in San Jose upon landing in Costa Rica? Had we seen the bodies pulled from the water or was that a memory made from reading the newspaper account later that week in the *Tico Times*? Too many years have passed and making up details feels like disrespect for the dead.



Another story I couldn't pull off happened after a party in Portland a year before I left town for Kansas. Or rather I wrote about the party as a prelude to the graveyard chase. The party wasn't important to the story. But when I tried to write the story each time I fell back on using the party as a way of setting the mood—the darkened backyard full of people drinking and talking and the harsh light above the garage door that clicked on when you walked past. Sitting at the dinner table I told Andrei and Vika about the three girls leaning against a garden shed smoking pot with an apple made into a pipe and laughing un-

controllably and I told them about the yard—a beer keg in one corner in a big plastic bucket of ice; everyone in coats or jackets; small groups talking (some quiet, others very loud) with their breath out in front of them because of the cold. There was no color in the yard due to the lack of light—the scene rendered in drab browns, deep and fathomless black, the parts near the garage door in dark sepia—a scene hid in shadows.

I'd gone to the party with Frankie and Jude who left early to see a metal show at Hawthorne Theatre. After that I attached myself to Liv, a friend from back home in San Diego who'd just moved to Portland. There was a very drunk girl at the party who liked me and had tried twice to kiss me on previous occasions and insisted on cornering me whenever I left Liv's side. I wanted to get away from her, so Liv and I left and walked home.

Crossing the graveyard to get to our neighborhood we were chased by a carload of drunk, screaming men through the grounds. That was the thing I wanted to tell. The rest—ornamentation, set design, filler. To get away from the men, Liv and I hid behind a crypt with two angels on top (the angels knelt facing each other, heads bowed, wings folded behind them, hands in prayer) while the men drove through the graveyard searching for us, their headlights splashing across the graves and fir trees and wooden benches. We were terrified but also thrilled to be hunted and the story stuck with me for years because of that—the danger and the joy. I remember trying my hardest not to laugh and I remember Liv trying not to laugh and how I swore later I could hear both our hearts beating, which is of course impossible. But mine beat so hard I felt it (and at least thought I heard it, and hers) thumping in my ears. What would those men have done had they caught us? Nothing good. Or was it all talk? They threw a few bottles at us from the car and they shouted (largely incoherent) slurring, violent threats. Were they trying to scare us or did they want to hurt us? The important thing was how happy we were with our lives put at risk. The thrill was one of the most animalistic and pure I've had.

I told Andrei and Vika that the logistical reality of the scene was a roadblock that has kept me from writing or even telling the story in any true sense. Had the men driven on the grass between the graves as I remembered? Weren't graves (most

graves) too close together to drive a car between? Surely they hadn't (simply, only) chased us down the roads that lead in circular paths through the graveyard. In that case getting away from them would have been easy. We could've stayed off the roads, crossed the graveyard lawn in any direction, and gone over the stone wall down to the sidewalk and street and disappeared into the neighborhood. But, as memory serves, getting away from the men was difficult and the pursuit (at least felt) endless. We were scared. But we enjoyed it. So perhaps we weren't in danger in any sort of real or life-threatening way. In this case it's the actuality and mechanics of the event itself that stop it from becoming a story I could write. At the very bottom of it, the physical action and geographical reality of the scene don't make sense, and because I can't force them to, it'll never work as a story.



The last story I tried all summer to write (and had been attempting on and off for years) took place on a trip back to the US-Mexico border from a section of coastline a half day's drive down the Baja Sur peninsula. I'd written about it after being asked to put together a feature years ago when I worked at the internet newspaper, but the piece was rejected (and thankfully because it was written quickly and badly, and because I played loose with the facts, making up unrealistic details when faced with even the slightest gap in memory). The story goes like this: we came upon the scene of the crash without warning after cresting a rise in the desert highway. On either side of the road—desert flats, low, hard, featureless. Beyond that a range of mountains to the north, faded blue in the light. There directly ahead of us, stopped in the middle of the highway, was the white Jeep Cherokee my parents' friends had been driving when they left the coast an hour ahead of us. The Jeep sat in the center of the empty road, facing us side-on, nearly blocking both lanes, driver's door and back doors open. A few yards away a police van lay on its side. We left our car with the engine on and ran toward the wreckage. I remember broken glass and items from the crash scattered across the highway—beer cans, a single light brown cowboy boot I nearly tripped over, a Ziplock

bag of hypodermic needles, a pair of bloody teeth my father pointed out a few yards from each other. The desert was quiet. Not a breath of wind. I heard our shoes on the asphalt; our shoes crunching the broken glass; the voices of my parents, though unintelligible—not words so much as exclamations, pauses, and changing tones.

The bodies of the dead men in the ditch beside the road were arranged in a row as if someone had pulled them from the vehicle (someone did, we learned later, and left them there for the coroner's van, which hadn't yet arrived). Six men. Federal Police. Federales. A couple with faces crushed in (a flattened cheekbone, a forehead pushed into the center of the skull like it had been hit horizontally with an axe blade). The others with not a scratch you could see; as if the force of collision had knocked them from their bodies (like the little galaxy of dust in the light when you shake out a bedsheet). They were small men, short, and they were of varying ages, though mostly young (and when you're a teenager you're a bad judge concerning the age of adults. Everyone is "old," like my parents. Who at the time weren't. Or "very old," like Señora Bichir, whom we would meet next. Or else they're a kid like you. I was seventeen; this was a year after the Nazi boat. I remember it as early or middle September; the warm, mild days had a chill to them by evening.)

The men wore matching uniforms. I don't recall patches or name plates or badges, but they must have had some designation of name and rank. Their eyes were open is what struck me first and stayed with me longest. I'd never seen a corpse up close except in movies, and in most movies when you're dead your eyes are shut. These men stared up at the empty blue sky, their eyes still fresh and unclouded yet without the light that constitutes (or is a sign of) life. I tried to turn around and walk away, but I found I couldn't move. Feet anchored in place, I dropped to my knees.

Mexico's legal code requires both drivers involved in a fatal collision to be kept in prison until guilt can be determined by trial. My parents' friend Daniel Lewis (like the actor but without the "Day" in the middle) and the driver of the federale van were put in a cell together. The federale driver died in his sleep the first night from his injuries (and was left until morning) while

Daniel's fellow passengers (who as nondrivers were free to go) were airlifted from the scene to UCSD Medical Center. His front-seat passenger had been sliced open across the lap by the Jeep's outdated seatbelt and spent the next six months in the hospital. The backseat passenger survived the accident with a fractured pelvis and a shattered collarbone. Daniel himself was uninjured except for whiplash and a badly broken nose.

The case made the papers because it involved members of the Federal Police. One of the smaller, more radical newspapers reported what we learned from the ambulance driver—who got his information from the coroner of the town nearest the accident—that the federales were drunk and high; the driver having shot up a mixture of cocaine and heroin before climbing behind the wheel. But the mainstream papers and the TV news we watched later in Ensenada reported a group of drunk US nationals had crashed into a van of innocent federales and that because the federales had been killed an important trial would soon be held to decide the fate of Daniel Lewis, who would surely be punished to the fullest extent of the law. (The TV news coverage featured long, drawn-out footage of the bodies in the ditch; hours after we'd seen them—the sun setting in the scene—and of the coroner's crew loading the dead men into the back of the van.)

My mother found a local advocate for US nationals in the next town who worked on cases like these. We went to the woman's house and she (Señora Bichir) told us that under no circumstances were we to leave the immediate area surrounding the jail; that in cases like these (this was the phrase we heard from nearly everyone, "cases like these") the police might take our friend up into the mountains at night, kill him, then bury his body to be rid of the evidence. (Daniel Lewis being "the evidence," the only witness still in-country to the accident.) Señora Bichir lived alone in a small white cinderblock house on the edge of town. I was told to wait in the living room while my parents sat with her at the kitchen table. I remember the house as lit only by the overhead light above the table and the television, which was set to news. I sat on the couch and stared at the TV while Bichir and my mother talked. My father, silent, watched the women as they spoke.

“Your friend is a dangerous person now,” Señora Bichir told my parents. She stopped for a moment to light a cigarette. “Dangerous to the government’s case.” The smoke of her cigarette hung silver in the light above the dining room table. “Dangerous to the federales. And the federales? They are dangerous to everyone.”

“How long before a trial?” asked my mother.

“Before a trial? That is very difficult to determine. First—first they will try their best to get rid of him.”

“Rid? Like you said? Driving into the mountains?”

“Driving into the mountains. Yes. But they will try other things. Something might happen in the cell.”

“To Daniel?”

“Something might happen. So your family, you have to stay in the area of the jail. Park your car outside. Have someone wait in the, uh—the lobby, the waiting room. There is only so much you can do as far as—as keeping him safe in the jail. But you need to show that you are there as a witness—that you are watching.”

“So we wait.”

“You wait. You bring him food. His meals. The police will not provide food or fresh water to prisoners.”

“Okay. We bring him food.”

“And water. If they move him to another town or jail? You go there too.”

“Of course. Yes. We will.”

“It is important for them to know that you are watching and paying attention.”

“Are we safe?”

“You are safer than your friend. But no. You are not safe. I am

sorry.”

Here my mother spoke quieter and Bichir first looked in my direction then leaned in to listen. They exchanged words for a while then my mother said, “What do we do when the trial happens?”

“You cannot let it happen. In cases like these? You must bribe the judge.”

“No, there’s no—”

“*Listen.* It is *normal.* Completely normal. It—it is just part of the system. In the town that they take him to for the trial—I think maybe Ensenada or Tijuana—you will hire a lawyer. He will arrange a bribe with the judge and your friend will be free.”

“It can’t be that easy.”

“The bribe, more or less easy. But you will have to raise a lot of money. Be prepared for that. Whatever the lawyer asks, you pay. Because if they get your friend as far as the trial you will never see him again.”



We stayed in our car (and slept in it at night) outside the jail on Señora Bichir’s advice and took turns in the waiting room to be near Daniel should anything unexpected happen.

The town was a single strip like an Old West film set with two or perhaps three bars, a gas station, a market, a farm supplier, and a shoe store on one side of the road. On the other—a mechanic’s shop that sold tires, a bakery, and a taco stand outside the bakery called Mariscos Javi. On the edge of town, on opposing sides of the strip were two small cinderblock churches, and beyond that a scatter of houses in the desert outskirts.

The food we brought Daniel each day was either market food or the shrimp tacos he liked from the stand. The meals the local families carried in for their loved ones were much more substantial—Tupperwares of chile rellenos arranged like a casserole covered in ranchero sauce and cheese, foil-wrapped car-

nitás tacos with cilantro and diced onions, various soups with corn tortillas on the side—and if you were the one waiting in the lobby you were guaranteed a meal and good company.

Each night a pair of plainclothes cops took Daniel from his cell, placed him in the back of an unmarked car, and drove up into the mountains. We followed along, keeping no more than two or three car lengths between us as Bichir advised. After an hour or so the unmarked car would return to the jailhouse with us close behind. This happened for a few days. Then they moved Daniel from town to town and put him in a series of identical jails for a day or a night or a few hours and we followed along to each new stop. When they moved Daniel north to Ensenada, a port city two hours from the border, my parents hired a lawyer and the lawyer told them their friend stood no chance of a fair trial. The only option was to wire money from the States (ten thousand dollars) with which he would bribe the judge (“a close personal friend, more or less”) and if the bribe was accepted Daniel would be released and declared a fugitive. Beyond that we would be responsible for getting him back across international lines before the authorities at the border were informed of his “escape.” (Part of the bribe insured there would be some delay in announcing the incident. “For him maybe three or four hours?” the lawyer told my mother. “They will let your friend out and you must take him quickly home. Do not under any circumstances let him return. He crosses the border? They will arrest him. If they catch him again it will be much harder to get him back. And all of you—” he said this next part with humor in his voice, but you knew he was serious “—stay the fuck out of Mexico.”)

We rented a room in a harborside motel in Ensenada while the money was gathered among Daniel’s friends and family and sent by way of Western Union from Daniel’s wife to us. Then the bribe was made and quickly accepted. Once released, Daniel safe in the backseat of my parents’ car, we made our way north to (then across) the US-Mexico border. The next morning, a Monday, I returned to school.

I couldn’t write this story in any complete sense because I failed each time to show how it felt—the hours of waiting and the uncertainty; the helplessness and anxiety as we drove through the

mountains at night, our high-beams illuminating the back of Daniel's head and neck in the unmarked car, and how small he looked, like a boy, a child, younger than me, and how powerless we were except as witnesses.

I couldn't—and still can't—explain with any measure of impact how I felt standing on the highway above the dead men in the ditch, their lifeless eyes staring up at the sky; how they were gone so newly their families hadn't been told and surely still thought of them as alive somewhere, alive working, alive going about their day and soon to return home. Maybe someone cooked dinner for them as they lay dead. Maybe plans were made with them in mind as their bodies cooled. I couldn't get across the feeling of being back at school that Monday and how much older I felt. I tried (and failed) to describe the once familiar faces of my classmates in the hall that were like people I'd known and lost track of many years before and now felt no connection to, and in fact spoke a language of experience different than theirs. I could tell the order of events as best remembered and I could describe the things I'd seen. But to tell how it felt? No.

The stories I tried to write but couldn't came with a series of prohibitions—walls, locks, gaps. Sitting with Andrei and Vika at the dinner table, after having explained those obstacles, I knew the stories could never be told well or written truthfully. I could talk about how I couldn't tell them but beyond that? It was easier and more fun to make jokes and be stupid. I joked about writing a better version of *The Great Gatsby* called *The Greatest Gatsby*. Andrei and I ran through endless variations of the name joke concerning Indiana Jones who had a new movie out at the time. (When he gets lonely and wants to make more of himself so he can have someone to hang out with? Indiana Clones.) Andrei performed a series of prawn-related monologues concerning William Erlich in a strange little high voice he had at some point decided William spoke in (he didn't) and he told us about workshopping the manuscripts Helen and Jake were now set to publish. Vika told us about her ongoing negotiations with the world's largest fashion magazine; the editors of which planned to feature one of her prints in an upcoming issue and how this came along with a new surge of interest in her work.

“It seems no one pays attention for ages then suddenly there’s this great confluence of interest,” said Vika, chin resting in the upturned palm of her left hand, elbow on the table, right hand fidgeting with the wine cork. “I suppose it’ll be a good thing for me.”

“Quite,” said Andrei with a nod.

I felt the sudden tightness in my throat that means a yawn is coming and without thinking of it made a fist and brought it up to my mouth just as the yawn took me. “Ugh, god,” I said afterward, my eyes beginning to water. “Oh. Another one.” The second yawn I blocked with the back of my hand.

“Now you’ve got me going,” said Vika and she yawned, bringing her arm up to her face to cover it.

Andrei yawned now without covering his mouth. “Fuck you both,” he said afterward.

“Odd how it happens, though,” said Vika.

“How yawning’s contagious?” I asked, and just thinking of it my jaw began to stretch outward and I yawned again.

“No, the attention you get,” she said. “As if suddenly a lot of people independent of one another decide they want something from you then that goes away and after a while it comes back. I’m enjoying it. Don’t get me wrong.”

“I think it’s great because it makes it feel like anything could happen,” I said. “Shows you that you never know what opportunity or—or what big break might lie ahead. Gives you hope. ‘You’ being me, I mean. But also the universal-you.”

“This’ll be massive, Vika,” said Andrei. “It’s a very big deal.”

“I’m sure,” said Vika. “It’s just strange to be in the middle of.”

“You deserve it,” I said.

“You really do,” said Andrei.

“I don’t know about that,” said Vika.

“Oh, don’t be false modest,” said Andrei.

“No, it’s true,” she said, “I fucking deserve it,” and we laughed then someone else talked or I told a joke or Andrei did an impression of the prawn-loving William Erlich, and more wine, maybe the Polaroid camera came back out, then 4:30am-dawn and the gray light paling through the garden windows.



The morning of the party I woke up late to the sound of Andrei and Vika’s boy René shouting the words to “Smells Like Teen Spirit” while the song blared down below me. I stayed in bed a while, too tired to move then pulled the covers back, sat up, turned, and bare feet planted on the hardwood floors, rubbed my face with my hands. The dream I had before waking (or hours in the past or somewhere distant in the night) stuck with me. Home. The warm light of the farmhouse kitchen in the morning and Alison making breakfast for the cats; her back to me, dressed in colorful tight leggings and a baggy white shirt, hair braided blonde and brown, singing quietly as she opened a can of cat food. Nothing symbolic or magical like most of my dreams. Just a flash of home. It was time to come home.

I pulled on the black jeans I’d left next to the bed the night before and stood. The last piece of the dream came to me then. Sitting at the kitchen table of the farmhouse while Alison made the cats their breakfast I looked out the window and instead of fields it was the sea—purple and blue, wind chopping the waves into frothing whitecaps. I knew I wasn’t in the kitchen after all but on a boat so far off you couldn’t see me. Symbolic, magical. But home still.

Walking down the hall and now taking the stairs my feet and legs felt like frozen clubs. Then life came back to them and with it came the pain.

Andrei and Vika sat at the wooden table, Vika with a laptop open in front of her, while René ran laps through the kitchen and lounge, singing along with Kurt.

I paused a moment on the stairs to take it all in because it was a

sweet scene and because it was my last day here and I knew I'd miss these three.

When Andrei saw me on the stairs he said, "We heard you coming down the hall—thump, drag, thump, drag."

"Happy birthday," I said as I stepped into the room trying my best not to limp.

"Thanks, mate. Want a coffee?" asked Andrei.

"God. Yes please. I feel like a cold, dead tree."

"Andrei Merce to the rescue," he said in his put-on cheerful voice that was meant to make fun of cheerful voices then got up and walked into the kitchen.

I took his spot at the table.

Vika, not looking up from the screen, said, "Done a stupid thing and over-drafted the account."

"Bad timing," I said.

"Terrible." She typed quickly, pale brow furrowed. "But I'm fixing it."

Andrei set a cup of instant coffee in front of Vika. It was the kind made from the brown, coarse grains in the Medaglia D'oro jar everyone I knew in England used; a pleasant, satisfying thing unlike other instant coffees.

Half minute later he returned with ours.

"Wake up, you shitty wreck," he said and handed me a cup then sat down with his, "—and one for the birthday boy" in the cheerful voice again.

Vika typed as she spoke. "I'm about. To. To sell a print and fund this. Whole. Thi—" she trailed off speaking as she hit the keys.

Andrei began to say, "If you can y—"

"I can," said Vika, then tapped one last key. "Now we wait. Right!" she said brightly, "Crisis to start the day?"

Andrei and Vika are like Alison and Frankie and me in the sense that we use a theatrical parody of arrogance and self-confidence as humor. We swagger and boast to mask vulnerability and lean on comical, sassy bravado to cover up anxiety. Taken from an outside lens we might come off prideful or even mean. The truth of it is we're just trying to get through the day and not be a mess. Knowing that they are coming from a similar place as me is comforting. The best kind of friends remind you you're not by yourself in this stupid, ugly shitstorm of a life, and they keep you working by doing the work themselves and by setting a brave, steady example. Some days when the news is nothing but a gathering darkness, when time is passing too quickly, and the future looks like an endless war I know I won't win, the fact that these people exist is good enough to set me upright and keep me in progression.

We sat and drank our coffees; the morning sun warm through the wall of glass.

René climbed up on the sofa between the lounge and kitchen and began to play a game on his tablet.

"James, would you like to see my game?" he asked in a voice that was both carefully eloquent and high and piping like any kid's.

"Absolutely."

I got up and sat on the sofa next to him.

"See, you make the monsters sing," he said.

Set on a sort of red Martian landscape, the image on screen swarmed with hundreds of tiny colorful monsters, each no bigger than a pea and each with a different voice you could activate. Once a few of them got going it built into a sort of polyphonic chorus and if you had enough of them sing it was like a gamelan orchestra or madrigal singers.

"Which is your favorite?" I asked.

"Of the monsters?"

“Yeah.”

“This one. I like his little voice.” He tapped the monster to activate it and it sang a shrill but tuneful “Yeccccccccc!”

“Done!” said Vika.

“Done?” I twisted back to look behind me.

She got up and folded the laptop and carried it toward the stairs. “Made the sale. Money’s in the account. All is sorted for birthday fun.”

“You’re a god,” said Andrei.

“I know,” said Vika, taking the stairs quickly.



I showered and dressed then the four of us left the house and walked down Two Mile Hill to the bus stop. It was a warm, mild, sunny day with a bit of breeze up, but you could tell it would get colder as soon as the sun began to set.

I wore the same outfit as at the wedding and it felt nice to be in good clothes out in public with Andrei, Vika, and René, who dressed well whether they left the house or not.

We walked single file down the narrow sidewalk, traffic whipping past, gray double-decker buses lumbering up and racing down the hill, a sea of people out on the streets, families walking together, Ubers pulling up to the curb, a college age girl with a shaved head a few houses down locking her front door, a large, unframed canvas under her arm, then taking the steps and going in the opposite direction as us.

“Pardon,” she said.

“Morning,” said Vika.

Across the street a man stood in front of a shop painting the last bits of a Halloween display on the window—a trio of pumpkins with long tracing vines and a witch stirring a caul-

dron. Painted on the window next to the witch, a small cat (also wearing a witch hat).

“That looks like *Waterworld*,” said René. *Waterworld* was the family’s cat, named after the Kevin Costner film.

“Too early for Halloween,” said Vika, as the man knelt to fill in the flames below the cauldron.

“Way, way too early,” said Andrei. “Let summer end first, for fuck’s sake.”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m always ready for Halloween. It’s early-Christmas that gets me.”

“I love both Christmas and Halloween,” said René.

“Which one’s better?” I asked.

“Both are better than many things,” he said.

“Fair,” said Andrei.

A pizza delivery scooter pulled up to the curb ahead of us and the man riding it climbed off and began to unzip the padded case on the back of the scooter which held a stack of pizza boxes. He balanced three boxes on the upturned palm of one hand while zipping the case shut again then walked quickly to the stoop of one of the row houses and rang the doorbell.

“That man had a lot of pizzas,” said René after we walked past.

“Think he can eat all those?” said Andrei.

“Yes, he can,” said René. “He was quite large.”

“He was no bigger than I am,” said Andrei. “Am I quite large?”

“Yes,” said René. “Because you’re an adult. Adults are large. Children are not.”

The bus arrived at the stop a few minutes after we did and we climbed on, tapping our debit cards on the reader by the driver’s seat.

“I like this bus tap thing,” I said as we walked down the aisle.

“You don’t have that in the States?” asked Andrei. “Barbaric place, yours.”

I began to say, “It’s true” but after the “ihh” sound of “It’s” the bus took off with a lurch and I stumbled forward and grabbed the metal bar.

“Alright, lad?” said a whitehaired man sitting in the seat to my left, a folded newspaper on his lap.

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Take my seat,” said the man, nodding down at the medical boot on my leg.

“It’s all good,” I said. “Thanks, though.”

“American?” he said, a shadow of displeasure darkening his face.

“Canadian,” I replied.

He gave me a look that told me he knew I was lying then picked up his newspaper and opened it to the middle.

Andrei, René, Vika, and I stood in the center of the bus holding the rails for support. We didn’t talk because no one else was and soon we were at our stop.

“Ours,” said Vika and we followed her off the bus back into the bright morning.

“Is it just me or did that guy on the bus back there hate me?” I said.

“Everyone in England hates you,” said Andrei.

“Then I’ve done my job.”

“Good work,” said Vika.

“Does everyone in England really hate James?” asked René.

“No,” said Vika.

“Yes,” said Andrei.

We walked back up the street a half block then Vika said, “Surprise, we’re going to Loaf.”

“Nice one,” said Andrei as I opened the door for us.

A woman with short-cropped hair brought us to our table and came back with a tray of waters.

“Give you a minute with the menus, yeah?” she said.

“Please, thanks,” said Vika.

“James, what are you getting?” asked Andrei.

I ran my finger down the menu and stopped on the thing I wanted. “The charred aubergine with sourdough.”

“I might too,” he said, staring at his menu.

A few tables from ours an old man and a younger one who looked just like him but narrower and with more hair were talking about how someone they knew planned to adapt *The Producers* to be a West End rock opera called “We Have Ways of Making You Rock.”

“*The Producers*,” said Andrei quietly. “That’s the Nazi musical, isn’t it.”

“It’s a musical now,” I said trying to talk and eavesdrop at the same time. “Was a film first.”

“I don’t think people will ever tire of Nazis,” said Andrei.

“Or tire of being Nazis,” said Vika.

“Coffee,” said the waitress. She told us the name of each drink and we claimed ours then she left and returned with an apple juice for René.

“I suppose there are certain kinds of people who will always take quicker to fascism,” said Andrei, lifting his cup and taking

a sip.

“It’s hit us back home,” I said. “Proud Boys, Bugaloo Boys, and all that.”

“Bugaloo Boys,” said Andrei. “Sounds like a joke.”

“Problem is it’s not slowing down,” I said. “No one likes Biden and the left hasn’t come up with an alternative enough people can get behind so we’ll probably get another four years of Trump. But back home? At least with my friends—most of the people you see on social media are—they’re posting pictures of their breakfast then—then like a smiling happy couples close-up or—”

“You don’t always know what’s going on behind the scenes,” said Vika.

“True. But it’s—I think it’s a good indicator. All hell breaks loose and a few people you know care about it and maybe—I don’t know, one or two are tryin’ to do something about it and then breakfast photos, happy couples smiling; and yeah I know just because people aren’t saying anything about it doesn’t mean they’re not feeling something about it, but it seems like we’re all a buncha—” I couldn’t help laughing but it was a bitter laugh “—a buncha fucking—sorry, René—”

“It’s fine,” said Andrei.

“—a bunch of Instagram Neros, fiddling.”

“It’s just as shit here,” said Andrei. “Especially post-Brexit. It’s always a surprise—I suppose it shouldn’t be—when people who find themselves stuck in a chaotic system look for control and stability even if the control is worse than the chaos.”

“Easier than looking to fix what caused the chaos,” said Vika. “But control doesn’t fix anything.”

“Right. Just holds it down a while,” said Andrei. “René, you okay, mate?”

“Yes. I’m drawing a monster,” said René. Bent low to the table-top, he drew the head then horns of a monster on his placemat

with a red crayon from the little Crayola box each table had then used a yellow one to color its face in. “He’s going to have scales, a shield, and a sword. Do you like him?”

“Very much,” said Andrei.

I took a purple crayon from the box and smelled it then set it back down. “I feel like—I mean, like ever since 2016 we’ve been living that fateful moment before the great flareup we can’t come back from. Or we’re just—like, I dunno, waitin’ around for what’s next.”

“And what’s next is rarely good if recent years are any indication,” said Vika.

“So we stand on the edge and wait,” said Andrei. “Or you two stand on the edge. I’m a man of action because I’m fucking awesome.”

“I reckon that’s our food,” said Vika and a moment later the waitress began to set our plates in front of us, saying the name of each dish.

After our meal, and before the desserts arrived, René wanted to play I Spy.

“I spy with my little eye something—yellow,” he said.

“The flowers on that man’s shirt,” said Vika, nodding at a man eating alone by the wall of windows. The man leaned close to his plate and carefully placed a forkful of scrambled eggs into his mouth, his hand shaking a bit.

“No.”

“His scrambled eggs?” I asked.

“No. Not his eggs. Or anyone else’s. Keep guessing.”

“Your crayon,” said Andrei.

“Nooooo,” he shook his head like it was the most ridiculous suggestion ever.

“The door frame?” I asked.

“No. That’s more green, James.”

“I guess so,” I said.

“Mate, we give up,” said Andrei.

“The light fixture directly above us!” said René happily, pointing up at the ceiling.

“Ah, good one,” said Vika.

“Shall we play again?” asked René.

“Of course,” said Andrei.



After breakfast we walked back up the hill. Vika had us go on ahead while she ducked into Tesco’s for a few supplies. “Nothing you’re allowed to see,” she told Andrei. He and René and I spent a while visiting charity shops so I could look for potential lucky hats and a book for the flight then took our time getting back. Plan was a few of Andrei’s friends from Oxford would arrive in the late afternoon and we’d all go out to a pub just up the hill for dinner and drinks then back to the house.

With three hours to kill I set up shop in the garden under the parasol and got to work. For a while I tried to write but couldn’t get there then gave up and read the Ocean Vuong book I bought in Exeter. I’d finished it a few days before, so I opened to a page at random and read, “After walking forever through it all, I make it to the end.” It felt like fate or luck or magic, so I read the rest of the poem then the next one, which began “October leaves coming down, as if called,” and I knew I could write again, and began to work and time slipped away.

The day grew colder and the clouds gathered to the north of us. I felt a flick of water against my neck. Then a second on my arm. After a third and fourth, a quiet rain began.

I gathered my things, knelt down, and crawled under the table

and got comfortable on my back in the soft, warm grass.

Shutting my eyes, I listened to the rain on the canvas cover of the parasol. You could smell it in the way only cities smell during a rainstorm—that pleasant mix of wet asphalt, leaves, and soil. Rain is different in the country. In Kansas the storms are wild and magnificent like watching a tidal wave coming and with it a fireworks show. In the city it feels gentler, more like a small gift you don't expect to get. When the rain stopped, I got up and went back inside to pack my things.



René stood in the middle of our small group of seven in the kitchen and beat his Stretch Armstrong doll against the floor, laughing and shrieking happily. All the adults but me had eaten mushroom chocolates in honor of Andrei's birthday, and they watched René with his great showman's spirit, some beginning to feel the drugs, everyone in pairs or a trio or a pair becoming a trio talking in disconnected conversations from the others as the boy (already in pajamas for the night; it was past bedtime) raced from the kitchen to the lounge and back again, hitting Stretch on the banister and on the edge of the wooden table and against the polished concrete floor.

Stretch Armstrong is a big latex rubber doll dressed in black trunks like a wrestler. He's called Stretch because you can stretch his body and his arms and legs four or five feet or so. (Then upon releasing him, he oozes back to his previous form.) It's an old fashion toy but one they still make, and one they might always make because children love the sort of violence that hurts no one.

René knew he was being entertaining and bad and he loved the attention. I saw Andrei in that—a pair of happy devils, and there's nothing happier than a devil. (Of course there's no fun in being an angel. Purity's an easy, smiling bore. Often a dangerous one when ideology gets into the mix.)

The fun stopped when the doll's neck split open in a small slit below the chin, and the shiny, clear gel inside began to push out (slow, steady like colorless honey pouring).

René dropped to his knees and burst into tears, the doll on the ground in front of him.

Andrei's friend Carl, a parent of boys himself, knelt next to René.

"Mate," Carl said gently. "Don't cry. It's alright. Look. What say we cut him open and see what else's inside?"

René's mood flicked from misery to joy as he leapt to his feet, the doll held by one of its legs. "Yes! Yes! *Can* we?!" he shouted in his shrill, merry child's voice, jumping up and down.

Carl, still kneeling, looked up at Andrei. "Dad?"

"René, mate, is that what you want?" asked Andrei, who stood on the other side of the kitchen island making a cocktail.

"Yes! Please! Please!" shouted René, still jumping.

"Go on then," said Andrei.

"Right!" said Carl and he went to work, fetching a knife from the drawer, then slicing Stretch open from neck to groin on the countertop above the drawer while René stood next to him on his tiptoes, peering up over the side.

"He's *still* having a brilliant time!" shouted René. "He" meaning Stretch but maybe René too, as the brilliant time seemed a way for René to come to terms with the dismemberment of his doll or at least put a positive spin on it and not feel bad for Stretch or see this as what it was—the end of him, the last bit of play before Stretch was tossed in the trash.

"Mate, he is!" said Carl. "He loves this!" Carl's mushrooms had come on before anyone's, and you could tell he enjoyed the dissection.

"Oh! Can we cut off his arms and legs?!" shouted René "—AND put his arms where his legs are and his legs where his arms are?!"

And we could.

And did.



Later, after Andrei put René to bed, Stretch Armstrong in a cut apart pile in the kitchen sink, I went upstairs to get my phone.

As I walked down the hall—limped, hobbled, the pain in my foot and leg a sharp, pulsing throb—I heard Andrei say, “Agh, you fucking cunt!” happily to someone followed by his dry, wicked laugh, and the sound of a cork popping from the bottle then a girl’s voice (maybe Carl’s wife) shouting, “Ooh! I know what to do!”

I opened the door to Andrei’s writing room.

There on the bedside table (lit by the lamp above it) sat my lucky Basin Valve Company hat.

In shock I put the hat on, slipped my phone in my back pocket, and went back down the staircase to the lounge.

The crowd around the table sat absorbed in conversation.

I took a seat across from Andrei who spoke quietly with Carl about the tabletop, which according to Andrei was now made of liquid but firm, like a kind of liquid plastic.

“Look,” Andrei said. “You can—look, you tap on it and it moves.”

“Your hat was between the bed and wall when I changed the sheets,” said Vika, hunched over the cocktail glass in front of her, holding it in both hands, turning it slowly, her eyes swimming—deeply, radiantly high.

“All this time it was?” I said.

“I reckon so,” she said. “I’m still in shock.”

“James, you sure you wouldn’t like a bit for the flight?” asked Carl, taking the bag of foil-wrapped chocolates from his jacket pocket and holding it out to me.

I thanked him but said no, that I’d have the worst panic attack

in history.

“Ah, mate, you’d be fine,” Carl said, happily. Someone had rolled a spliff and he took a deep drag then let out the smoke which clouded the air above the table. “Gahhh,” he said with pleasure. “That’s well good.”

Andrei had both hands palms down on the tabletop; he stared at it, face inches away. “You can see little—little *bubbles* of light in the water, can’t you,” he said. “Carl, look.”

I got up and walked into the kitchen. “Wine left?” I asked.

“Fridge!” said Vika.

I opened the refrigerator door and a wall of cool air hit me. The lit-up food. Plastic containers of sauces and condiments. Fresh vegetables. Oat milk in a white carton. Three tall-cans of lager with the plastic four-pack ring still attached. And in the back on the bottom shelf a bottle of pinot grigio—grassy yellow with a black label.

“Found it!” I shouted back to Vika.

I took the bottle out of the fridge and walked back to the table as I unscrewed the cap. “I’m gonna drink this from the bottle if everyone’s fine with that,” I said as I sat back down.

“All yours,” said Vika.

“Mate, you earned it,” said Carl.

“Oh. What? You’re lucky again,” said Andrei with a bright smile, noticing the hat.

“Why’s he lucky?” asked Carl’s very high wife Lucy sitting between Carl and Andrei, her eyes glazed and heavy-lidded.

“The curse. It’s a long story,” said Vika.

“A curse? Should I be worried?” asked Lucy.

“No, you’re fine,” said Vika. “The curse is over.”

“Oh good,” said Lucy. “How does it feel to be lucky?”

“It’s more a relief than anything,” I said.

“How lucky are you?” asked Andrei’s friend Nick, sitting down on the edge of the bench seat next to me. He and his wife Kay had been outside, smoking in the garden.

“Do a scale from one to ten,” said Kay who sat down at the corner of the table opposite Nick then placed a vape pen in front of her and turned it like a clock’s dial as she waited for my response.

“Solid nine. Well, no. Shock’s over. So it’s downgraded to eight.”

“Eight’s good, though, isn’t it,” said Kay, taking the spliff Vika passed her. “Thanks, love.”

“Course, my darling.”

“What time are you meant to leave?” asked Nick.

I pulled my phone out, pressed the button on the side, and looked at the screen. “Ugh, god. About an hour. Flight’s at six.”

“Six? In the morning?” asked Lucy.

“Yeah, like five hours from now six.”

“Bloody hell,” said Kay.

“The journey’s going to be dreadful for you,” said Vika.

“I’m so sorry,” said Kay.

“He’s lucky now,” said Andrei. “He’ll do fine.”



At 2am I called an Uber and Andrei and I stood outside by the row of trash bins to wait.

The night breeze blowing across the road carried with it an icy sting. Summer had turned the corner and ahead lay fall.

“Well. You did it,” he said then gave one of the bins a little kick.

“You came back to England and somehow survived.”

“I did.”

“With only one hospital visit.”

“Worth it,” I said as the Uber driver pulled up. “Spoils of victory justify the wages of war?”

“Something like that,” he said.

I raised one finger to the driver to mean “Hold on just a second” and the driver nodded then his face was lit by the screen of his phone as he stared down at it.

“Look, James, don’t be so long returning this time.”

“I won’t. I promise. Thanks for havin’ me.”

“I’m glad we made it happen. You know, anytime.”

We hugged then broke away. He folded his arms across his chest and looked at me suspiciously.

“What?” I asked.

He didn’t say anything.

“Come on, what?”

“Get the fuck out of here before I kill you and throw your shitty corpse in the bins.”

Then the dry, wicked laugh.





NO 10  
APRIL  
MAY

# *EPILOGUE*

Concerning the Good Life to Come

The Uber took me down Two Mile Hill to the bus station and the bus took me to London Heathrow. I checked my bags, cleared security, then sat through a twelve-hour delay thanks to weather. On my delay I read a French novel from the 1950s I'd picked up at a kiosk, ate two unsatisfying meals (both breakfast), bought a coffee I couldn't finish, a decent gin and tonic, and menthol cough drops, then flew six hours to Boston. In Boston it was a ten-hour delay for staffing shortages. I tried to sleep on the floor up against a wall, failed to find any food worth buying, finished the French novel, finished Durrell's Cyprus book, then flew four hours to Kansas City International. Once home I slept through the night and long into the afternoon and awoke to a bright, sunny day unsure of where I was. Not England. Not Bristol. Kansas. The States. The farm. I fell back asleep and slept until dusk. Two days later I flew to the West Coast for a book tour from San Diego to Washington, rented a car at the end of it and met up with Frankie who had a week with the boys during their summer stay at Jude's. I hung out with them a few days at a mountain resort in Bend, Oregon; in the middle of which I drove to Seattle for one last reading, followed by a final day in Bend. After which Frankie and I drove to Portland, dropped off the rental, and flew home. Upon arriving I told Alison what I always tell Alison: "I am never going anywhere again."

Back on the farm I kept up the schedule I'd established in Bristol. Slow mornings. A good breakfast with fresh herbs from the garden—olives, yellow pear tomatoes, cucumbers, French bread or sourdough with olive oil. Then reading for something near but rarely over an hour before making my to-do list. Then book work.

I wanted to see myself as a razor and a magnifying glass; the book had to be the best thing I'd done or why do it? So when I worked I tried to work sharper and more focused than ever and when I rested I kept up the leisurely pace I'd liked so much in Andrei and Vika's garden. All of it done outside. Either on the front porch when the sun was at the back of the house or on the back deck overlooking the fields when the sun hit the front.

On the hot days there were many breaks to float in the inflat-

able pool I'd set up on the deck under a red canvas umbrella. I wore black swim trunks and a long sleeve shirt unbuttoned in front to take off easy, and in the evening I drank Durrell's lion gold wine. Dinner was abundance from the garden. Fat pasta corkscrews with eggplant cooked down for hours into a dark, peppery nothing. Pumpkin gnocchi with a sage and browned butter sauce. Capelini topped in sauce from the tomatoes we canned or in the walnut pesto Alison made that was good on everything. Fresh herbs with all meals. On the side—cantaloupe or watermelon we grew, the watermelon with diced-up mint I'd planted along the fence-lines to keep it safe from the mower. The extra food we took to Frankie's dad and stepmom's farm market or gave to people we knew in town or dropped off at the university's food pantry. The chickens ate what went bad.

The humid nights in the last stretch of summer felt tropical. You heard a rising layer of frog noise and crickets, cicadas in a dry rasp as the heat rose and fell. Every few days a thunderstorm; lightning slicing across the horizon in hot, sharp lines. The smell through the open windows in the morning was cut grass and hot earth, wet from the dew. At night—rain on the bitter leaves of the walnut trees, smoke and ash from the firepit.

After working, Alison and I sat up late and talked. I told her about England but slowly—stories told as they came to me. We spoke of how if you immediately text someone once a thing happens you lose the power of telling a story when a story should be told. You need to let it come natural. The feeling of remembering a story or a detail you want to tell someone is often as exciting as the event itself. "Oh I forgot to tell you—" then you tell it and the telling is how it should be because it's a shame to rush a story or tell it at the wrong time just to get it out. Sometimes the joy in remembering even the smallest thing hit so powerfully it was overwhelming to tell and I was glad to have those memories come to me, and to have something left to tell in the future.

Soon Willy and Johnsy would fly home from Oregon. Soon the cold months would come. Frankie found a great old house she called "the Hobo Mansion" in the fraternity row in Lawrence—a vast, sprawling, ruined place with holes punched in the walls, busted plumbing, and a yard full of beer cans and

years of broken glass. It was more than she could afford but cheaper because of the mess and thanks to the sympathetic landlord who, devastated at how the college students had treated the place, let her move in before it was fixed up, provided she do the work herself. (Alison and Frankie and I would handle that together.)

Knowing the boys would come back to Frankie's new place felt like a victory and a victory was what they all needed after this past year's dismantling. So I worked on the book and Alison kept up the garden and took care of the animals and Frankie moved into the Hobo Mansion. There was plenty to do and none of it easy, but the possibilities felt encouraging. I knew we could rise if we continued to work hard and if we believed in the work we did and if we planned well, followed through, and took care of each other.

None of the good outweighed the darkness of the times. Each constituent piece of a greater whole stacked up to create a wall we could not see the top of (much less climb over). We followed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Anti-trans bills and regressive immigration policies. Then the tipping point and all hell broke loose between Israel and Palestine. I thought back to the conversation I had with Vika and Andrei about standing on the edge waiting for what was next. Now instead of waiting we watched as the bombs fell.

The first few days our friends posted about the attacks then it was meal photos, jokes, and self-portraits again. "It's going to get so much worse," said Frankie over text to Alison and me. "This is nothing. The worst has yet to come." And it came. Those hopeful the US would step in and broker a ceasefire lost hope quickly. The friends of ours who still gave a shit suffered every day as they tried to make sense of it all. The rest continued to live. I couldn't blame them. How do you maintain the day-to-day tasks of basic human existence when the gore and terror of genocide livestreams across all our phones? How do you make a difference up against insurmountable opposition? Why try to change things when things never change? The evidence we're given tells us to stay quiet, enjoy what you have, don't make a stir because it won't go well for you. If you decide to care about something (or if you're unable not to) there's a

tendency to forget what's still good in life, which leads to forgetting why you began to fight in the first place, and that will tax your spirit. I reminded myself that the world we had was the world Willy and Johnsy would be left with and that gave me courage to keep caring even on the worst days (and god they came and were many and felt as if they would never end).

When you find something to fight for you begin to notice what else is worth saving. To force yourself to remember the primary action, forces, or events that pushed you to do what you're doing is often to find greater strength to do it. I knew most of what I tried meant nothing, affected nothing, but all of that was small next to the reality that Willy and Johnsy were worth the effort. Once you take stock of what's worth fighting for, you see the beauty of life (or you're reminded of it) and if you're any good you know you have to keep working. I knew I had to fight for Alison, Frankie, Willy, and Johnsy, and for my friends overseas—for Vika and Andrei and their boy René, for Rob Kobayashi in his party realm, for the newlyweds Jackson Holmes-Phillips and Victoria, for King Murad in his shop, and the residents of the Serpent Church, William, Kerstin, and little Otto in his highchair.

God the world is beautiful. But what have we done to it? We've laid waste to ourselves and our home. So you work, you fight. You pay attention, care, and help in any small or great way you can. You fight for a kid's chance to go to school without being shot to death in her classroom. You fight for all the creatures we share the Earth with—for lazy housecats staring out the window, for elephants and sea turtles, for lions in the tall grass, for dolphins, gorillas, bluejays, earthworms, fireflies, goats, and horses. You fight for the icecaps and redwood trees, for restful sleep without conflict, for the chance to look at a painting for no other reason than to look at a painting. You fight for unlocked doors and for fresh grapes, for bookstores, punk bands traveling the interstate hoping they reach the show that night, for Girl Scouts selling Girl Scout cookies, for chickens pecking in the weeds, for little gray birds thrashing in the bird bath, for children locked in border cages while we shop or watch TV or stare at the internet, for the man sleeping in that doorway you pass on the way to 7-Eleven who could be your son or your

brother. You fight for safe places and for adventure, for home and for away, and for a high-walled garden where you sit with a good friend and let the day pass slowly. You must fight for the world itself and for all the wonderful and kind things in the world and for those yet to be born to live in it and enjoy the sweet days it has to offer. So, shoulder to the wheel, we pushed on—tired, beat up ragged by the events of the day, rarely satisfied but always hopeful; and as we worked I thought often of the good life to come.



# MAP OF ENGLAND

SHOWING THE POSITION OF  
THE ARMS REFERRED TO



