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A 40,000-word Miami novel written in 13 days

by Timothy Stanley

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## Chapter 1

Vicente didn't hate drywall. He didn't hate joint compound or drywall tape. In his day he could make and mud a wall better than anyone around. He wasn't the best, he wasn't Ecuadorian, but he was "pro," or professional, a term he learned on coming to Miami as a teenager. Everything was "pro." Miami was "pro." The construction crews who threw up the high-rise condos on South Beach were "pro." A few years of doing nothing but throwing up drywall and mudding, mostly for high-end fast food chains that sprung up along Biscayne Boulevard and Vicente was "pro." Vicente didn't hate drywall. He resented the work when done incorrectly, by someone who didn't spend the time, who threw up the sheets and tagged them in quickly, without a screw pattern. He resented the mudding when thrown up in haste. This was the artful part. He saw it all the time. A guy would walk in smoking a cigarette, grab a dirty blade and a rusted bucket, run a thick coat into the seam, grab lunch, give the semi-dry seam one scrape with the knife and throw on the second coat with as much carelessness. He'd prime and call it a day. Then the boss would come in asking who mudded the walls, because now they were bubbling or chipping. Vicente would cringe. He cringed at the site of a rusted mud knife that left golden brown stains in the joint compound and along the wall with each swipe. He hated the popular mesh joint tape, preferred by non-"pros" to the paper tape, which was more difficult, took more work, more mud coats, looked better and lasted longer, of course, when done correctly.

When done correctly, drywall was satisfying. In his experience, there was no way to construct a wall, one of civilizations most important achievements, the genesis of privacy, as he saw it, as quickly as drywall. Give him some gypsum board, a kind of cement board drywall that was water and fireproof, some thick, paper drywall tape, a bucket of Sheetrock joint compound and, his favorite, a brand new blue stainless steel mudknife, and he could make a beautiful drywall divider. On the contrary, he quite liked drywall. But in his twenties, Vicente began to travel. His work for the company had become indispensable and he went with them, the elite team, when the national contracts began rolling in. He had seen the adobe houses in New Mexico and Southern California. Simple, yellow and pink single-story casas, all of a single, simple material. He loved running his hand along the walls of these houses, when his coworkers were in the yard smoking on their break and he remained inside, admiring the floors in the few spots not covered with masonite, the "pro" way.

He had flown to Vermont with his boss, when he started to manage the carpenters. The trip was just a weekend, the contract ended up falling through, and good thing, because he didn't think he could handle that kind of cold. But

Vicente had seen the timber-frame farmhouses, had run his hand along the wooden banisters and spied the dark, oak floors.

His daughter now lived in a beautiful townhouse apartment with her husband in New York City. He remembers chiding her in his way for spending considerably more money on their apartment, simply because someone had gone in there and ripped out a perfectly good molded wall and scrubbed down the brick of all the mud and mortar. He gave his daughter, who humored him better than either of the other two, a lecture of the kind of walls that were taken down, about level 5 (full, even, beautiful plastering that covered the entire wall) and level 3 (unfinished drywall, taped mudded at the seams) and the famous moldings of the pre-war apartment buildings the city was famous for. "Exposed brick" was costing him a fortune in the money he assumed his wife still sent to her every month. He and his wife had, in fact, stopped sending their kids money when his youngest was twenty and now that his daughter Mari worked in the PR department at a chic New York magazine, she was actually sending them a bit of money every now and then. But Vicente never imagined he would be surrounded by drywall, now, at his age, after a lifetime of hard work. One thing he never told his wife: he thought about death every day. He wasn't afraid of it, he felt of death like someone he wanted to show off for, like a interesting dinner guest. And when death came for him, he imagined, all he would have to show is a perfectly seamless, level 5 drywall coffin, a monolithic white volume waiting for a corpse. The edges were fitted with corner bead and when death ran his hand over the box, she would notice the wonderful, lightly-marbled texture of the paint and mud. Not a single bubble. This thought made him shudder, and to pick himself up he imagined the white room.

The white room has white wooden walls and whitewashed shutters through which shards of white light pour in. This white room sits three stories from the ground and when the shutters are open, the smell of the sea comes rushing in with the sea breeze, filled with microscopic crystals of coarse, white salt. In the distance, skating slowly across the water, are tiny white sailboats with thin white sails. The grand bed in the middle of the room is fitted with white cotton sheets, four white pillows and a soft, white comforter that floats on the surface of the bed like a white cloud. The old wooden floorboards are bare except for a small rug made of white fur.

In the summertime, when the sea breeze begins to warm, the room has two white fans, which stand on opposite sides of the room, oscillating back and forth and making flutter the edges of the sheets and the corners of the pillows. Across from the bed is a whitewashed dresser. Sitting atop the dresser is a large round mirror into which his wife checks her appearance before work. And apart from the twin wood nightstands on either side of the bed, and a small crystal chandelier dropped from the ceiling, the room has nothing else.

In this house there are other rooms, and in these rooms other colors. The Persian rug reds and blues of the living room, the pastel purples and yellows of the nursery, the maroon, hunter green and brown of the dark library. The graying black of the oil stained garage floor. In this house the other rooms have other things. The scattering of plastic toys in the den, the dozens of books of matches and the recycling cans filled with empty wine bottles in the bright, airy kitchen, the wet, white cigarette butts hiding at the bottom of those bottles, the muddy hiking boots drying in the foyer, the computers and devices and the hills of leather-bound books in the library, the buckets of screws and the rusted and scratched tools in the workshop. The white room has only a white rug, a whitewashed dresser with a mirror, twin wooden nightstands, a crystal chandelier, two white fans and a grand, white bed. Nothing else.

In *The Silence*, a film by Ingmar Bergman, a mother and son arrive by train at a Swedish hotel during the day, ready to bathe and nap after a long journey. The young mother, a blond beauty, falls into the white bed, clean and naked, letting out a comforted sigh. When he watches his wife sleep, lying gently in the flowing hold of the white cloud, wearing nothing but a small smile on her face, he will remember the silence.

This, he thought, is where I should die.

And this is what he thought to himself, lying on his back, staring at the ceiling, after a slow but strangely painful fall left him exasperated on the floor. This thought began the week before. He and his wife Irma had come back from the grocery store to find that their ceiling had grown a great, white bubble, which looked like a white pus-filled zit. Three fat drops of condensation were clinging comfortably to the bottom of the football-sized pox. Each of the units in their oceanside, South Beach apartment had a small, cage-like balcony, where Irma snuck cigarettes and Vicente spied on the bikini-clad teenagers walking to their cars from the beach. Their upstairs neighbor, a maniac, according to Irma, liked the feel of the ocean air in his apartment and would leave his sliding glass door open when he went out. A rainstorm a day earlier had pooled in a crack in the marble and slowly started leaking down. When he saw the latex bubble, Vicente didn't say a word. The walls of his home were rebelling against him, like his skin on his elbows and knees when he was stressed out. He grabbed a small tool kit from under the sink and instructed Irma to grab him a bucket from the bathroom. He grabbed the step ladder from the closet in their bedroom and set himself up, staging all of his tools on the coffee table, double-checking the ladder for stability and taping down a ripped garbage bag underneath the growing abscess like a "pro."

He lanced the bubble with a utility knife, on the side of the bubble so as not to unleash the pus all over his apartment and wife. The thin latex paint skin began to tear slightly, so he grabbed the bucket and pushed the belly upwards. The yellowed, white specked, water trickled out of the wound like coconut milk. Irma winced, but Vicente stayed “pro.” The next step was to cut away the paint, anything that was wet and peeling. He used a rusted mud knife he hadn’t had occasion to break out for years. He scraped down the paint and the wet joint compound, leaving exposed the paper of the drywall, a cheap non-waterproof drywall sufficient for any city not regularly exposed to hurricanes.

If you let water sit on top of drywall, with the mixture of air conditioning and insulation above it, you were bound to get mold, the kind of mold that shuts down Taco Bells and kills one infant and one elderly person per decade. Still, the smell was horrible and after drying the spot with Irma’s hairdryer for a half-hour, Vicente began cutting out the drywall, anything wet and crumbling. Irma loved watching him work. Around the kids and her friends, she would roll her eyes at his need to fix everything, to never ask for anything, any help. She liked American sitcoms and the trope of the hapless DIY husband who, though pretending to be a macho man with a drill, was still a cuddly teddy bear underneath. The truth was though, and Irma knew it, that her husband was a macho man with a drill, in fact, he was a bit of a wizard and an encyclopedia of materials, tools and interior architecture. And watching him work still gave her a schoolgirl crush on him, seeing him on the ladder, never betraying any thought other than “there’s a job that needs doing, and I will do it.” When he was working, he never snapped at her, because he never got upset, at least, while he was working. He talked to her the way he talked to his employees, as calm and cool as could be, while he was working. He was a teacher in the purest sense, while he was working.

In his younger days, he would never have lived with a giant hole in his ceiling, not in his own house. But the Home Depot was in Hialeah, he was feeling a great deal more tired these days and with his eyesight going, needed Irma to drive him everywhere. He was ok to stand up, he wasn’t hurt just shaken up, but instead he lay staring at the hole. He thought about his son Jose, the hot-shot real estate broker.

Jose was nearing forty, the eldest, and the only son still in Miami. He was a momma’s boy who talked to his father sweetly but disrespectfully. In his panic that Vicente and Irma wouldn’t be able to support themselves on their pensions alone, Jose found this apartment, a modest, small place on the seventh floor of a beach front high rise. Nothing could be more perfect as an investment. Jose would hire contractors to redo the interiors in the style of the building, and wait for the market to get good again. In the meantime, his parents would have a great place to live, his parents, who were modest and simple people.

Vicente was simple enough, even to his own admittance. He loved his home, no matter where it was, in Cuba or Miami. He loved Irma and Irma made any house a home, just by filling the closets with her clothes and leaving her perfume open in the bathroom. He chased girls when he was a young, and fell in love with a woman, and this was, in his mind, the story of his life. He loved the beach, because the ocean was the same everywhere, the watered horizon too enormous to feel any pressing concern as more than a sandy itch on an ankle. Once or twice a week, Vicente would walk out to the beach and set up his beach chair, mid-way between the boardwalk and the water. He would drink two Presidentes and eat a pastrami sandwich and watch the water. After a half-hour in the sun, he would take off his shirt and walk into the ocean until the water came to his knees and the waves sprayed his potbelly with mist. Like a Muslim ritualistically cleaning his hands and feet, his face and the back of his neck, so too would Vicente wash himself in the seawater. The saltwater soothed his cracking, flaking skin and revived his character. This was his ritual. After his second beer was gone, he would enter his apartment and see his wife, who never looked up at him from her cooking until after he had showered, changed and stood behind her to kiss her cheek.

But to get from the beach to Irma, the two things he loved, he had to walk through the lobby of his building. Even after years, he still never got used to walking back through the lobby after his beach day. He pushed open the door and felt the cold, mechanical air rush into every formerly cleansed pore in his face. His wet toes flapped and snapped in his sandals as he slowly and suspiciously crossed the cheap faux-marble floor of the lobby. He heard the sound of water from a small, painted cement fountain in the center of the room. Its tinkling trickling sounded like the echoing piss of an old man with a swollen prostate compared to the virile roar of the Atlantic. The air smelled like the antiseptic, not like lemons, but a horribly cruel man's robotic vision of lemons.

Between his wife and his ocean there was a room that imitated perfectly to him, the torture of being on an airplane, the smell of air, the coldness, the pressure it put on his eyes, the assault of his senses. A sense of relaxing luxury decided upon by a committee of decidedly less-than-luxurious people, all deeply stressed. And it was this ride he took every day, like travelling hours to rub his face with the ocean and flying hours back to kiss his beloved.

He saw a blur moving in the distance, a hand waving, maybe? Yes. The young, Cuban doorman saying hello. He lifted his cooler slightly above his waist. This was about all the social courtesy he could spare for the gatekeeper of this lobby, of this condominium. The elevator smelled of old white men, whose smell was so distinct to him. Marty had that smell, he thought to himself, in the years before

he died. After the elevator was the hall and after the hall was the nape of Irma's neck, and the kiss he layed there. Her neck that smelled like Cuba.

Vicente's sense of smell had rushed to the front of his senses as his eyes became worse and worse. When he was in his late thirties, on a jobsite in downtown Miami, Vicente spent a week rewelding structural supports for a building that had been rushed through production on every level. He stepped in as a favor to Larry, whose friend and business associate was fucked and needed help. Vicente was a skilled welder, but had to rely on the tools of the fuckers who fucked Larry's friend. A few years after the project, Vicente made the mistake of telling Irma that the welding mask they gave him to use was no more than a sheet of thin black plastic with an untreated glass viewing hole. He was sure, at this moment years later, that the glass was normal glass and that for a week he had been staring unprotected at welding arc after welding arc, an act that causes flash burn, or retinal keratitis, in the eye if untreated. After telling her this, Irma went on a crusade for financial justice, encouraging Vicente to sue the company, to sue Larry's friend, to sue Larry, if necessary. Vicente wasn't the type and after months of this talk, got so angry with Irma that she didn't bring it up for a year. The truth was, and Vicente knew it, that the job was dirty and he found himself in some uncomfortable positions while welding, sweating profusely. He had taken his mask off more than once, and people saw and actually commented on his cavalier attitude on the jobsite. This would, he was sure, come out in any court case.

Whether or not the flash burn was responsible for his terrible vision, Vicente didn't know. He did know however, that he saw well enough, and well enough was good enough. He saw this apartment well enough, staring up at the ceiling. Saw it for what it was. A rental. Jose had begun showing people through when he knew his parents were out of town. Gently, one day, he suggested that they hide their pills and personal effects in the drawers and in the closets, and that he let them hire a decorator to give the apartment more of a friendly, beachy vibe. Irma loved the idea, and Vicente grudgingly agreed, since it meant the two could travel somewhere new. They went to Savannah, Georgia, to stay in a lovely bed and breakfast Irma found. Vicente saw the wooden columns of the old plantation homes, mirroring the long lines of Spanish Moss trees. No drywall in there, he imagined, incorrectly.

When the two returned, everything had fish on it. There was new fish art hanging on the walls and blue pillows with bluefish sewn on them. The couch and coffee table were framed with bamboo and the Oriental rug he and Irma bought together was replaced with a scratchy white throw with blue fish swimming in a stenciled, stylized white and blue sea. The anger at Jose's disrespect and the constant stream of thoughts were the only thing keeping



Vicente awake. The rain started down on the railing of the balcony. The television was on the news.

In weather news, the National Hurricane Center is now calling Irene a category 3 hurricane with wind speeds up to 120 mph. Hurricane Irene is being tracked off the coast of south Florida and is expected to reach the continental United States in a matter of days. The storm has been moving east with every mile but The NHC is still calling for warnings and possible evacuations of the eastern coast of Florida, possibly up through Georgia and the Carolinas.

Vicente stopped thinking about Jose.

We're just getting in word now from the NHC that Irene could be, by the time it reaches the coast of Florida, a category 9 hurricane, with winds as fast as 300 mph. Irene is reported to have an unprecedented seven eyes, two noses, a mouth and a tail. If experts at the NHC are correct, and we here at News 7 like to think that they always are, the effects of this storm could be devastating to Miami. Cars will fly through the air, aimed at condominiums along the beach like bullets and water will flood single-unit oceanside apartments, dropping the property value significantly. The violent rain and wind combination will smash through the sliding glass doors and into the apartment, turning the drywall to paper-covered putty and ripping out the cheap aluminum studs hiding behind, which are as difficult to look at as it is to drill into. The concrete balconies of South Beach's storied high-rises will fill with rain until they bubble and fester and pop, one by one, until the bottom row resembles tissue paper remaining in the toilet bowl after the flush. The ocean will rise and tides will flood over the boardwalk and into the lobbies. Small bergs of sharp ice will form in the air conditioning and swim swiftly through the water, ripping to pieces anyone still working inside. Irene is coming. The apocalypse is upon us. Run for your lives. Back to you in the studio.

Vicente stood up slowly, and braced himself as the blood ran from his head. He walked over to the sliding glass door and flipped the metal switch. Of course, the thing was off its track. He couldn't imagine how a woman of Irma's size was capable of doing so much damage to a door that weighed more than she did. She must have gotten on her back and starting kicking at it. His fingers barely fit in the handle anymore so it took him a moment to get a grip and pull. He wrenched the door back onto its track and slid it open it as far as it would go. He turned off the television and slinked into the bedroom, onto the bedspread, too tired to make his way underneath. He closed his eyes.

## Chapter 2

At some point, she wasn't exactly sure when, it became clear to her that if she wanted to talk to a handsome young man, she would have to approach him. Maybe when I hit thirty, she thought, but she could be sure. When she was thirty, she was married. When she was thirty, she was married to a big guy with big shoulders who scared all the younger guys away with a look. At forty, she was no longer married, not in her mind anyways, and these boys were still boys. They still needed a woman to teach them things and they needed a woman to help them kick the girls and move on to something really exciting. But most of all, they really needed a woman to teach them to approach a woman who was standing by herself on the balcony in her nicest dress, drinking straight vodka rocks. That, she thought, they desperately needed to learn.

She turned away from the light of the interior and faced out at what had to be the blackest night she had ever seen. There wasn't a single light glistening on the surface of the water. The strong breezes that, every minute or so, made her skin tense and a chill roll through her back were enough to tips of the closest waves barely visible as grey squiggles in the black.

Still, they were cute. Tall, white boys with blonde and red beards and chiseled chins. Miami was filled with beautiful girls, up and down South Beach, but the Soho Beach House had the cute boys, the wealthy, well-dressed ones. She wondered what they looked like naked, not in a completely sexual way, but she did think about it. Mostly she tried to remember what she liked, if the totally cut buff guy look still did it for her the way it did when she was twenty-three. She had gotten used to belly flab and back hair and stick legs on hulking bodies, hairy nostrils and ears. She had grown to love those things in the lovers she loved, of which, before meeting Gray, there were many. She wondered if the hairless, toned look still got her hot. She imagined it did.

When she was young, she dated older. Sexually she bit the bullet, but security was important to her parents and, if she was being honest, to her as well. Now, though, the dealership pulled in money, her kids were old enough not to cost a complete fortune and she thought about sex constantly. Being alone hurt, even though she spent most of her day around employees, customers, a personal trainer, and two very sweet, very demanding children, one girl and one boy. The bed was too big, and something about it always being made-up bothered her, like she lived in a hotel. She had once asked the maid Leticia if she could leave the duvet as she found it, but Leticia could not allow it and she found herself unmaking the bed every night before sleep. She could see her trainer Matt silently doubting his training skills, and he had been punishing her lately with upper-body, which was torture for her. With her legs she could press and squat like the boys, but she still snaked up in child's pose every time she tried to do a push-up. He was punishing her for eating at night, when the kids were in North Carolina with their dad, and drinking beer, which was not wine.

Matt liked when his work showed results. He liked looking at her body when it looked good, when he made it look good, she thought. And now he was disappointed in her. Once he told her she looked hot, in a young boy way, as though he had no idea what it did to her. To him, she thought, it was like saying the waves looked good this morning, betraying absolutely no lust. Still, he said it as fact, and she thought about that comment constantly. Now, though, she didn't look hot, she looked fat, and he took it personally. She knew she was paying him, that if it hurt, she should say something. But she didn't, and at her desk at dealership, she found herself spasming from time to time, and knocking things over. She didn't like pain, never had, but she didn't want Matt to think she was quitting, or that he was beating her.

Her mind again turned to the ocean. The faint outline of the black sea and sky and the chilly, refreshing wind that swept her hair behind her shoulders. At this moment, I look beautiful. She imagined the men inside stopping their conversations dead.

At that moment, she heard the glass door slide open and a man, talking as he walked out, glide behind her to the corner of the balcony. He laughed and said goodbye in an affectionate way, though he didn't say I love you, or I miss you, or anything like that. He just laughed, and said "bye" informally enough to give himself away. He put his phone in his jean pocket and rested his forearms on the railing. He was posing, as she was, and the breeze rustled both of their hair perfectly and simultaneously, as if they were two sexiest people in the world. He was intentionally not looking at her, not giving her anything, pretending like the majesty of the blackness had touched the artist in him and he could only be counted on to write a poem at this moment, instead of turning to the beautiful woman to his left and introducing himself.

"It's never usually this dark," she said, not moving to look at him as she said it "Is that right?"

"Yea. I heard on the news there's a hurricane on its way here."

"Yea, I heard that too."

He wasn't giving an inch. He seemed actually more interested in the black abyss than her. A fag? No, she could usually tell. Still, he was friendly, and letting her talk. The small talk began to take hold of her, she was doing all of the work and getting nothing back, like her marriage and a string of boyfriends before that. It angered her. She began to talk more. This was the boy, the tall, chinny, bearded boy she wanted to bring home and she began babbling. He mentioned he was from Virginia, so she talked about North Carolina, about the incredible food and about her piece of shit kind of ex-husband, about how her two teenaged kids had so many friends there and moving back to Miami was a bit hard on them. If he

was listening, which he was, now, a bit more, he could have guessed how old she was, just by forensic deduction. When he went into his pocket to check the time on his phone, she pulled down her dress and exposed her cleavage a bit more. She was getting more honest, he got her another vodka and when he came back, her skirt was higher, her breasts more exposed, and she began dropping “fucks” and “shits” like a construction worker. He moved in closer this time, and began to talk about his family. He gave up his age, after she asked seductively. He’s such a baby, she thought.

“You’re not going to tell me I’m a baby, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Good,” they giggled, “thank you.”

The silence was good. He was still smiling and had plenty of drink left. He didn’t seem in a hurry and he had developed an adorable drunk tick of raving madly about how beautiful and incredible Miami was every time he looked at the ocean. It made her smile. They weren’t fucking on her Persian rug, or eating brunch at the place around the corner, but she had told him everything about herself, her age, her past and he was closer to her than ever, using every chance he had to touch her. Things were going so well.

“Can I ask you a question? If you don’t want to answer, that’s fine.”

“I mean, I’ve already told you the big stuff. Sure, shoot.”

“Who are those men in there? The ones around the table near the window.”

Her smile washed away. There was no use lying, if he wanted to fuck her that night, he was going to meet them, or at least she’d have to explain.

“They’re friends and coworkers of my husband.”

“I thought your husband lived in North Carolina.”

“He does, but we both used to live here. He has an exotic car dealership north of here, near Bal Harbour, do you know where that is?”

He didn’t.

“Yea, anyways, it’s mine now, officially, but all the guys he hired still work there. It’s hard to explain. When I go out, they kind of go with me.”

“Do you ask them to go with you?”

“No, God, no. And I wish they weren’t here and that you didn’t see them but they are here. When I go out, they go out with me. Supposedly it’s to protect me, but it’s not...I...I’m sorry this is boring. Let’s talk about something else.”

He wasn’t letting it go. Question after question, until she got angry.

“Please, drop it. Ok, look, I’m going to go home and I want you to come with me. But I don’t want to talk about them or my ex-husband anymore.”

“You brought him up.”

“I know, but I’m done. Do you want to leave with me?”

She hoped he would say no.

“No. I mean, I would. You’re gorgeous, but I have a sort of...”

She had already turned her back, but he stormed out past her.

"It was nice meeting you."

Yea. He went back into the room so she decided to wait on the balcony and finish her vodka. Fuck.

Her mind turned to the dealership. The new Bentleys and Lamborghinis all in beautifully ordered rows. The floor zombies standing and waiting for customers as though a hundred rich white men would be walking through the door any second now. She imagined the front tires of the new Aston Martin begin to bounce gently. The wind was picking up and shooting underneath the chassis. The silver Aston was now bouncing like the low riders in Los Angeles. At the top of one large bounce, a gust of wind sent the coupe perpendicular, stalling it for a second at the top of its arc and falling backwards onto the hood. The rain beat down on the undercarriage and the palm trees that announced the front entrance of the dealership were plucked out of the ground and thrown like javelins into the windshield of the pearl of the collection, the Bugati. Water soaked into every corner of the leather interiors, into the radios and wood veneer gearshifts. The great category 9 earthquake taking apart piece by piece the empire Gary had created. His henchmen, Antony, Alvaro, and Alex, all trapped in their executive offices, gasping for air as the dark water filled the space, taking deep breaths and swimming down to find a way out. The floor manager Hank, a fat Texan, having his hairpiece blown into the staff lunchroom by a gust of wind shooting through the entrance. Twisted metal, she thought, and felt a chill of excitement run down her back. She looked through the windows again, trying to find him. Couldn't see him from here, though she was sure he hadn't left.

Irene was on her way. She could see it in the blackness. Miami was never this dark. She could smell it in the air, like a mold. Irene. She felt a chill. The kids. Where would they go? She needed a plan. Time to go home. She could drive to them in North Carolina in no more than 8 hours. Maybe Gray would let her stay the night, to clear out of the way of the storm. It wasn't supposed to hit North Carolina, just a category 3, they were saying. They would all be safe and the family would be together, if only for a day. The kids would love that, she thought.

She finished the rest of her vodka and walked back into the room, past the young boys. She had no time for boys. A hurricane was coming and her children needed her. She saw him laughing at a friend's joke. She hated him. Goodbye, little boy. A real woman is coming through. Motivated as she was though, she floated through the room gracefully, putting foot in front of foot and working her hips as she clutched her purse. The air was still, but her hair swung behind her shoulders as she walked.

### Chapter 3

In the drowning wetness of Miami's August, amidst the fat, sliding dewdrops that cling to and fall from patio table legs and fill select squares of insect screens like wave glass blocks, the ground is swollen with new life, and hatching hatchlings foreign even to the lizards themselves. Their silent arrowheads stare down at the wet, hot ground, wondering what next will be born of it. Will the slimy new growth be a morsel of maggot for a lizard to feast upon? Or will it be a foe like countless others once under earth, something to run from, in stops and starts? Spikes of rain coat their still and spying eyes like molten glass and drown their bleats in high-pitched choking. The sound like wet fingers rubbing rapidly back and forth on a thin pane of glass.

They are there, hiding in the husks of the palms and sheltered in the wild green grass, but their swirling camouflage is failed by their vast and growing numbers, as, no matter where they are, they are more likely there than not. Upon crossing one another's path, a gecko acknowledges the empty wooded space in front of him, only to have the empty wooden space acknowledge him in return with a call like a fingernail scratching an itch.

A thumping human step and the reptilian screams grow silent. The geckos run, without the pattern of direction or speed and seemingly without regard for their lives. They will run away, run east of, run west of or run towards the foot that stopped the sounds, the sounds like the burps of a plastic kazoo when played by an infant.

When one runs, as she does to search or to hide, she stops and starts, as though each forward bursts has taken her too far away, and she waits for the world to catch up. Her tiny belly hovers off of the ground, but her caliced scales are accustomed to climbing and rubbing up against surfaces soft and hard. She never heaves or slows, her lungs were made for moving, and with the next diversion comes the next direction.

And with this thumping human step, the geckos run for fear of the attacking foot, but only from the immediately surrounding area. The effect is that of a single fat raindrop splashing on the concrete pavement, and spurting a molecule of water in every direction. But the others do not move, the impact is local, and not great enough to join them together. They remain strangers to one another, the lizards do, separated by distances of interminable length marked in sections by drastically different landscapes. A single lizard will move a lifetime in a day, finding himself in a new place with every scary thump, pausing when danger has passed, and sounding again with stories of a new home, like the clicking of a toy car pulled backwards to wind. When the car is wound it is released and starts out with furious speed, only to stop and be wound again.

Threatened, a lizard will drop its tail and emit an odor of fear like feces. The effect of a million geckos afraid is that of a single waft, a slight change in the atmosphere, as though the world feels more fertile, more impregnated and bleeding, flatulating and defecating. When the wind passes, the smell is gone, the lizards forced to fight without weapons. They are an army of soldiers that has, on the first day of battle, wasted an entire quiver of arrows on an armored brute unlikely to sate his bloodlust for days to come.

They sing when still, their beeps like the tiny pressure pops of moist lips pulling apart. They sing when still, do not need run and the songs signal the comfort of home like the sounding of a dinner bell, or the crackling of a fire in the hearth. Their purpose rests on their pursed lips, making satisfied smiles with wide, hopeful eyes. Like contented seniors in a nursing home, watching television and wondering with hope about their grandchildren, the smiles are muted, but there, with the power of humble relief.

The arching arms of Miami palms make bridges to high ground, wet with shining water. From this height, a lizard can see entire worlds of molten, tropical life. She rests on this arm to make a sound like a bottle cap being dragged slowly across a marble floor. Below are hundreds of other geckos, noticeable only as sounds, like the wheezing whistles of rubber chew toys when squished and released rapidly, but gently. Among the soaking branches and the paths of decaying detritus is the intoxicating anonymity of metropolis. This is the freedom of the first step never necessarily being the last and the last step existing, most definitely, far, far away from the arching arm of this Miami palm.

At the end of the green and golden bridge, the lizard clings willingly to whatever is there for her. Like the crags of a climbing mountain the textured adobe plaster gives way for sticky lizard feet, all ribbed with neon stripes like phosphorescent sea anemone. Further towards the body the stripes become spills of ink and indigo, or shards of crystal orange and yellow, or a shimmerless green matte or deep opulent blue like ancient Ottoman dyes. The skin of a lizard is like a scent, noticeable first as one thing before morphing into another, all while remaining the same the entire time. The skin of a lizard is not a coat of armor, or fancy dress, or a mark of personality; it is a personality trait as vital and powerful as joy or jealousy. It is an organ as alive as her eyes. Every slither through the grass paints her further with thin wet swabs of bacteria.

When a lizard eats a mosquito, he holds it in the hollow cavity of his mouth for a moment, letting the bug's wings flutter and bounce against the thin, hard bone of his beak before swallowing. The air inside is still and dry. The mosquito feels no sharp slitting or slicing of tiny teeth crunching his brittle body, just the sheer strength of the tongue, its gripping incarceration and the frustrating futility of struggle. With a pull of the throat, the bug is folded into itself on its way down

the neck, its wings and arms pulled up and narrowed like clay on a pottery wheel. Once the bug is down its gullet, the lizard will purse his lips together in a smile, then open again to release a note like the shrill breath of the wind through a keyhole.

Without the threat of disaster, the invisible and moving earth moves invisibly, happily and there is more life in it than death. Lizards are at once strangers to one another, and linked souls, like the wind-worn fishermen of eastern Anatolia, and two eggs are always hatched for every one lost, that is, without the threat of disaster.

There will be the sounds of lizards, like the short sharp screams of the zipper of an overstuffed backpack, until there aren't. Until the noises like the exploding squishes of overly ripened grapes are replaced by a louder whirring rumble that fills the sky. The ominous sound of a televised broadcast of a rocking blasting off. The darkness above erases the sharp shadows of the blades of grass and the ground brush is now a flat, grey sameness impossible to navigate. In the tense moments of silence a pairing of beeps is heard, like shards of dull green and brown seaglass scratching up against each other, almost inaudibly, on shore.

When the silence strikes, a single lizard clinging to the coolness of a kitchen window drops suddenly like a pinecone down to the brush beneath her. She hits without a sound, her acceleration halted gently by the wet blades of grass and balled up blankets of mud below. Unharmful from the landing, she begins to run without concern for the world's slow turning, over the concrete steps and underneath the sopping wet cushions of the outdoor armchairs and out across the crawling front lawn and into the street covered in rotting leaves.

The air above the wet forest makes a loud cracking wallop, like the sound of a million feet stomping, or a hundred cars chortling, only the stomping or chortling is everywhere now. The chortling is in the sky, that impossibly far space above the endlessly tall trees, the tops of which are seen only by some. The thunder announces the wind, the lightning calls forth the rain and there is no place to run except one.

No single foot can move them all and all in one direction, as though the ground is shifting west away from the wind and rain. For this it is required a powerful and singular force that stops the chirping dead and sends a million dinosaurs marching in formation. Lizards run from fear of many things in Miami, from rats and dogs, but never for long, and the lost ones are each replaced by two hatching eggs, lying in a dark wet nest somewhere safe. So it was when the world was young, so it will be when the dark consumes its face for the last time.



But now the lizards are frozen in the changing wind, which dries their coated eyes and scales. Their feet grow tired at the tensile tests of their surging muscles gripping the adobe and the husks more tightly than normal. It is here, the hurricane, and the screams are replaced by the inaudible sound of sticky feet running without stopping in streaming teams of ancient creatures. The random single raindrop splashing are replaced with rows of straight lines tracing along the earth like sound waves and flattening the frail brush underneath their scaly bellies.

The wet has become drowning, the weather is in the air now not the ground and the world seems bigger than the underbrush. They see their ancient faces reflected in front of them, and for the first time, believe their size to be much smaller.

In the manic runs of the millions, a floating magic carpet of reptiles, lost lizards lose footing and flip up onto their backs, the others unknowingly carrying the floating gecko forward like ants hauling crumbs of dirt back to the anthills. Some are crushed under the sticky feet of hundreds more and left for bleeding death. Some run with unified ambition, forming unflappable sheets of abandon. The life of millions is a singular life, as the millions of molecules of living salt become a sea and are represented by a single tide. And the millions of shards of glass and stone become the beach and accept the tide over top of it. The moving tapestry of geckos is painted with colors so diverse and minute as to form together to make brown, a morphing stop and start of murky purple and brown. Tiny specks of light green and yellow catch the dwindling orange light pouring in through the dense palm trees and cast a metallic sheen over the fleeing hoarde. A skin of silver mercury floating on a sea of dark blood.

The direction the lizards choose is found internally, an ancient decision passed down through history to move northwest with even the slightest sense of deadly storm in their nostrils. It is not enough simply to be in the mass, to follow when all others lead. Like a circle of gypsy dancers gyrating perfectly in time, one must know the mass' movements so as to move seamlessly with it. Each lizard is born with a direction, if not a destination.

When the storm is gone, the sounds will start again, this time in unison, like a thousand microscopic chisels carving a thousand names in the cement. The lizards are far from home, and are home, and will start out in another direction just as soon as the song is finished.

#### Chapter 4

I am eleven. Eleven. I live in Miami, Florida, in South Beach but near the beach not on the beach. My building is at the end of a long road where there are lots of

other buildings and lots of people making things and selling things. When I was born there wasn't as many things on the street but now there are lots of stores and stuff in the middle for kids to play on and people to see.

Yesterday, I heard the bookman talking about the hurricane Irene and I got very scared. I am not a baby but I still get scared of hurricanes because they break things and it rains very hard and it's very windy. And they are very dangerous. A hurricane is when a lot of storms mash together in the ocean when the water gets warm and they all mash together to form one super storm and then the super storm attacks Florida.

My dad said not to be scared of the hurricanes because weather is just weather and we can prepare for it but sometimes I still get scared. It rains a lot in Miami and I like being in the rain but the bookman said that this hurricane was going to be a big one. A kaffer, which means one that's really, really big. In a kaffer, the wind gets very fast, like, faster than a car, and all the people close the stores on my street and go hide. When I was a baby I was scared of the dark but it always gets dark everywhere at night and there are lots of lights on my street even when it rains. And now I'm not so afraid anymore because I'm not a baby anymore.

There is a Japanese man who sells clothes and other things downstairs. I like him. He is very nice and he has bright orange lights in the window of his store that glitter all day long and make my building look very pretty, I think. He says hello to me every morning. Well, he doesn't say hello but he smiles at me and he bows. That is what Japanese men do when they want to shake hands. I heard the Japanese man and the bookman talking about Tokyo. That's where the Japanese man is from. Tokyo. The bookman said it was a very beautiful place but very hard to get to and very expensive. He said Miami and Tokyo were very different places, and the Japanese man said that was true, but there were also lots of things the same. The bookman said that this was true, and he scratched his beard.

There is a pretty woman who lives alone on the fifth floor of my building and sells clothes. She is young and pretty and smells nice. Dad says she's a snob. That means someone who thinks they are better than everybody else. I like her though because she talks to me almost every day and I can ask her questions and she tells me. She says I'm pretty like her and I hope that I am because she is so pretty and glamorous, like a movie star.

One time I asked her why her clothes don't have many colors, like, they are all black and white and grey, well, mostly. She said that wasn't true. But then later she told me she really doesn't like colors that much and I said I don't like colors that much too, either. She told me a secret that Miami has too much colors and what it needed was black and white and grey.

She likes telling me secrets because I'm great at keeping secrets and I never tell anybody, not even my dad. She tells me secrets about the other people in the building, and I know I shouldn't be listening to secrets about other people but I do anyways. She told me that the Japanese man downstairs doesn't like colors either. But I said that then why does he have the orange lights in the windows down there if he doesn't like colors. She told me I was smart. She said "Yes, but the things he sells are black and white and grey." And we laughed, because that was silly that he only liked colored lights and not colors on clothes.

I asked her if the Japanese man was a snob and she said yes. I said I didn't think so because he was so nice but she said "Don't let him fool you, he's a snob alright." I think she is very smart. And if she is a snob and he is a snob then maybe it's not so bad a thing to be a snob. I didn't tell dad this. He knew I talked to the woman on the fifth floor sometimes, but he didn't know every day.

I don't think my dad likes her very much. He says that she sells clothes to people who have too much money and they don't know what to do with it and that if somebody with a decent job can't buy a rain jacket to keep dry in the rain, then the store isn't worth going to. But she makes nice clothes that make girls look pretty and some for boys too and she looks very glamorous and she always smells like flowers.

Once, I asked her if she was a snob, and that made her laugh. She asked me where I heard that from and I didn't say. I said that no one told me. She said someone must have told me. Then I said I couldn't remember who had told me, and she started to get a little mad. She scares me when she gets mad. Her face gets all scrunched up and it gets red so I told her that my dad told me that she was a snob. And she said "why did he say that?" And I said that he said that she sells lots of clothes that people can't buy because not a lot of people have enough money to buy her clothes. She said "trust me, honey, people in Miami can afford it. And guess what?" And I said "what" and she said "Your dad is a snob." I told her she was stupid and I cried but later on I said I was sorry I never asked her anything like that again.

One time I asked her if she likes cars and she said no because the smoke from the pipes in the back of the cars makes her windows dirty. She said that the old cars drip oil on the ground in front of her store and then it's impossible to clean up. And she has to smell it every morning and all day long. Dad says it's bad but I like the smell of the oil. Old cars smell like oil and there aren't so many of them in South Beach because the rain is bad for them when they get old. But there are lots of new cars that are very pretty and fast.

I didn't tell the woman on the fifth floor that I like cars. I said that I didn't like cars because she got angry when she said about the dirty glass windows and the

oil spills. I like cars a lot and I collect them. I like clothes and books too, but cars are my favorite. I still like the woman on the fifth floor but maybe dad's right and she really is a snob.

I have a lot of cars, all kinds, and I have ramps they go up and down on. It's really, really fun. When they go up the ramp, they circle around to find the perfect spot and then they go in rows next to each other. When it's time to leave the cars get out of the spots and go around to the top of the ramp and go all the way down again. I lied to the woman on the fifth floor, I really like colors and I like seeing the colors of all the cars when they're in rows like that. I like the red ones and the blue ones, but not dark blue as much. And the white ones. And sometimes the green ones.

When I'm done looking at the cars in their rows, I like to watch the lights go on and off in all the buildings around my building. When it's raining out, the sky gets very dark and it gets very windy. The wind comes through the building and I shiver. The lights of Miami are all over the place and the buildings are tall near the beach.

I heard the woman on the fifth floor talking to the bookman and telling him that our street wasn't Miami, not really. I asked my dad how our street could be not Miami but we're on our street and we are in Miami. He asked who I heard that from. I didn't want to say the woman on the fifth floor so I said the bookman. My dad said he was a snob.

I don't like the bookman. He sells books on the corner and he doesn't talk to me much, only to say to me to say hi to my dad. Sometimes he does talk to me and he talks to me like I'm a baby, which I'm not. I think he is a snob. Dad says the bookman is super smart and knows everything. He knows my dad very well. I think they work together. That must be how he knows him so much. He has a strange accent. An accent is what your voice sounds like when you're not from Miami. My dad has an accent but his is less and not so ugly as the bookman's. And the bookman's face is ugly, although the cook tells me I shouldn't say things like that about other people. I don't care he has an ugly face. His store is very pretty and there are lots of big books about art and things like that. He is mean sometimes. He likes to scare me because I get scared about the hurricanes and about burglars and he thinks it's funny and teases me. He said that I'm too big to be scared of hurricanes.

When I get scared about the hurricane Irene, I talk to my dad and he makes me feel better. I asked him about the wind and what happens if the wind is so strong. He said that I was so strong and he told me to make a muscle. I made a muscle and he said it was so so big and hard like a rock and that no wind could ever knock me over because of how strong I was and that I shouldn't be scared.

Then I told him I wasn't scared of the rain so much anymore. It rains all the time in Miami and I like to get wet when it rains. Then the sun comes out and I get dry so it's not so scary. I said that I wasn't scared of the rain but I was scared of the thunder and the lightning. I learned that lightning is electricity and it shocks you. When you get shocked it really hurts a lot. And thunder hurts my ears and makes me very, very, nervous. When I told him that he laughed at me and I got started to cry a little bit because I was mad that he was laughing.

He told me he was sorry for laughing and that he loved me. He told me that thunder and lightning were the same thing, so that I already didn't have to be scared of one of them. He said "Cross one off your list," and that made me feel better. Thunder comes first with a big boom and then you count seconds one, two, three, four. Then you know how far away is the lightning. When we hear the thunder we count together and then he says "That lightning is a thousand miles away. It can't hurt you from a thousand miles away. See? Nothing to be scared of."

I remembered the wedding. Sixth floor, I think. All day people were up there making everything look so pretty, with plants and flowers and pretty plates and delicious food. The wind was blowing so hard, I was so scared. I felt the air pushing against my bones. The plants fell over and people ran to hold down the plates and the knives and forks. I kept my eyes open. Then I saw that the bride and groom were still dancing, they were laughing. Her dress was flying in the wind and his hair was all messed up but they kept dancing and soon everyone was dancing. When I saw them smiling and kissing and laughing I wasn't scared anymore. I let the wind push against my bones but I'm so strong and the wind can't do anything. My dad said that was just a tropical breeze, not a hurricane, but he said I was so strong and a hurricane was nothing for me.

Then I asked him about the cars. What is going to happen to the cars when it rains and the wind blows so hard? And he told me that I didn't have to worry. Cars were strong like me. They get rained on all the time. They can drive in the rain, although it's very dangerous because the road gets slippery. When the hurricane comes the cars will stop driving and hide in a safe place, like me, and wait for the hurricane to be over. They might get a little bit wet but as long as the windows aren't open, the rain will just go over the engine and will come out of the bottom and nothing will get hurt. I was worried because sometimes cars rust when they get wet a lot of times. This is silly because cars don't rust anymore. That made me feel better. I don't want the cars to get ruined because then they are not beautiful anymore.

My favorite person in the building is a cook that lives downstairs. He was the first person to live in my building. I hardly ever see him but I can smell the meat cooking from where he lives all the time. It makes me hungry when I smell it. I

love it so much. The woman on the fifth floor thinks the cook makes food that is gross and she hates the smell all the time, but on the fifth floor I don't smell it all so I think she isn't telling the truth. Later she told me that people go see the cook to eat greasy meat and then come into her store and touch the clothes and get the meat grease all over the wool and she can't clean the wool once the grease is on it. She got mad again when she was talking about that so I stopped talking about the cook. The woman on the fifth floor was getting mad a lot now so I started to ask the cook more questions and see him more times. I didn't see the woman so much anymore. She was a snob.

Once the cook told me that he is from New York City, which is a place far away, but not so far away, like the lightning. When I see him I always ask him about New York and he says it is a very colorful city. I think I would just love it, because I love colors and he says there's a place where you can climb up and see a million of lights glittering and it's so, so pretty. I said I wish I was in New York. Then he told me that Miami is pretty, even prettier because we have trees and the water and the boats and everything is pretty here and everyone is happy because the sunshine makes people happy and nice. He said that in New York there are so many lights because there is no sun and so people are not very nice and not very happy too, either. And then he told me that people don't drive cars very much and that some people do and they're the meanest kind of people. I said I didn't want to be in New York after all and that I loved Miami and South Beach and I wanted to stay. He said that I was smart and that was a good idea.

## Chapter 5

In the latest Hurricane Irene news, the NHC has issued a report saying that the storm has begun to veer east as it approaches the coast of Southern Florida and that if the swing continues, the storm could miss Miami entirely, and would only hit the Bahamas and possibly the Carolinas. If the storm pushes out farther east, as has been reported, the cold water of the Atlantic so far off the coast could cool this storm down to a category one. Coastal homes in Florida, Georgia and the Carolinas have begun to evacuate inland in preparation for the category 3 hurricane that Irene is currently. If reports are true that the storm is moving out east and will dwindle down to a category 1, its insides won't look so ominously purple and the spirals won't be so spirally. This report comes as a welcome change to the previous string of updates likening Irene to the "asteroid that buried the dinosaurs in dust." Surely a strong, powerful storm like this is not the type to capriciously change her mind once she has made a decision. Pause. We are getting word from the NHC now that our tone is unacceptable. The NHC has sent a follow up report scolding us for our insolence and has included in its apology on our behalf a written commentary clearing the air about its relationship to the storm.

“She is complex and guarded, giving us few clues to her true intentions with our shores. As always, we advise the county and the state of Florida to prepare for the worst, the kind of physical and emotion abuse that leaves scars like roadmaps of pain along our bodies. That being said, diplomacy has not failed completely and we continue to give her her space but also to ask her deferentially yet firmly if our destruction is really what she wants, though we understand completely if it is and do not mean to infer that she can’t make up her own mind. Furthermore, we would like to formally apologize for temporarily changing the name of the storm to Hurricane Emma Bovary. This was done in a moment of frustration, we were angry and we are truly sorry. We understand that Irene is a young storm, who still has much ocean to experience, changes to undergo, and we at the NHC mean never to ask a question with the force of one who needs an answer, even if in that answer lies the key to the avoidance of our absolute doom. We mean only to say that, when Irene is ready to talk, we are ready to listen. Until that time we remain,

Patently and sincerely hers,

The National Hurricane Center

## Chapter 6

Daniel had swimmer’s shoulders. He wasn’t the perfect specimen, as his arms were too long and all of his weight seemed to rest in his torso. But his shoulders. He had large flat feet and zero coordination. He was gawky, but when he grew into his baby face, and put some muscle on his six foot three frame, he began to get some attention. He had a horrible slump, though, and when he stared into his microscope, as he did on this particular occasion, he seemed to envelop the edge of the stone table in the cavern of his upper body.

Perfumers rarely came into the lab, though they were probably supposed to. Daniel didn’t notice that Amy and Will had suspiciously stopped talking. He was zoning out, pretending to work. JP commanded the two chubby chemists to shush with a finger to his lips and feigned actually walking on tiptoes, which betrayed the straight vibe JP tried to carry when around Daniel. Now directly behind the arched white lab coat, JP slowly raised his flat palm to let the drama build and, in a quick, but not violent, motion, brought it down on Daniel’s back. Daniel jumped.

“Ca va, mec?”

Daniel looked perplexed, then looked at Amy and Will. They were pretending to work.

“Look, man. Um, I came to check on A124a. You got my email, yea? The new one? I’m sure that I sent it. Anyways, there is too much grapefruit. This is the second time I ask you to fix it and it’s the same. Tell me.

Daniel, still shaking off the scare, stood up and walked over to the fridge, took out A124a. He handed it to JP, along with a thin white touche that looked like a rolling paper. Will perked his head up. JP sprayed the touche with the juice.

Oui...Yea?”

On this, Daniel, still silent, reached back in the fridge for A124, which formed the base of the mixture he had spent the last week tinkering with, as per JP’s orders. Amy, noticing Will, also looked up to watch.

Daniel made a point of walking to his computer and printing out the email JP had sent him only hours earlier. The email was short enough, with a short p.s. this time. “We ok?” The tension was rising as JP watched on stunned as Daniel took him through every tiny step of his job without saying a word.

For the next thirty minutes, Daniel, with JP over his shoulder, made A124a exactly how he had before, using only the ingredients JP included in his email. Still, he said nothing, except one “pass me that?” to deflate the tension just a tiny amount, like cutting the intensity of citrus with a tiny dose of indolic jasmine. When he finished, he sprayed a touche with the juice and handed it to JP.

Daniel had turned to walk back to his microscope before JP had delivered his final verdict. He was already sitting down when the final word was in.

Amy and Will looked at each other, the air of tacit confrontation had silenced them and now only horrified faces could express their mixture of awe and disapproval in Daniel’s behavior.

Bah...ok. And with that, JP swiveled on his heel and walked back to his office. JP was right, it did still smell too much like grapefruit, but it was his fault, not Daniel’s. Daniel had done everything he was supposed. In a moment of rare introspection, JP asked himself if he had already known that before he walked down there. In another moment of rare introspection noted that, in the future, he had to stop falling in love with straight guys.

## Chapter 7

like the last traps of land seen from the scanning eyes the last traps who were so sublimely brave and without fears of suffering and death suffering and death suffering and death to resist the spiraling air that darkened the sky and



decimated the vegetation and the populations of tiny slimy bloody creatures yes just like them this tiny beacon in the distance standing and waiting with his leering smirk at the arrival of une autre fille and with that controlled sexy swagger underestimating the severity of the furies bounding ever closer towards him oh the confidence of a coast made strong by the barrel-chested inland of the father with unfounded faith in his surviving son an inland representative of a history of healed smooth scars and the faded sadness of the memories of winds and rains past still though in the shaking spinning and spitting and shaking spinning and spitting and shaking spinning and spitting of salt and water and waves and the murking rumblings of shattered rocks and beautiful lost birds flapping their wilting wings in fear so beautiful with white white feathers and red snapped necks like the delicate wooden reeds that trim the rivers and lakes and break so quickly oh the masts of the smashed ships left in the white wake like a gurgling chaos of parts once glued together with glue and nails only sticks so easily cut down with the slurping surge and the slurping surge and the slurping surge of the ocean water and broken like bones healing in the bobbing crests with bandages of snotgreen weeds that wrap the cracks and splinters oh quel surprise to see nous ici he will hear the words and smile at our arrival with the guilty red rushing blush like the blood drying into sand and made strong and salty by the ocean water this man this man so learned of the woman and prone to pacify once the wind is made strong again and he sees the fear in his own eyes oh but once we raise the sea to meet him and the vain lost desire for destruction we shared he for us he for us he for us and we for the destruction that is the blood stream of a family of destroyers we raise to him the sea to greet him on this day oh he is handsome again after the last tryst when we left him bleeding and crying out into the darkness to desist but oh he is handsome there in the distance stronger than his challengers the tiny spits of lands who fell no nobly and so quickly like the lost anonymous armies now landless now all called Greece no but he is Rome the gaudy bejeweled masculine smelling of an imitation of the ocean noticed only by the spitting girls who brush their long, thin fingers through his hair like girls pretending as lovers and succeed only to paint his face gently with what he will capture as wisdom and character not gouge their surnames in his cheeks like a woman equal to his games and his resistances a woman made of women who smashed the first ships built in the white north on the rocks of the sweltering south and sent searchers for one home in the presence of another when the world was new but wait he is so quiet there in the distance glimmering with the lighted eyes of a soldier who has seen the fire of battle the fire of battle the first of battle and fills his satchel with the bullion of a dying race saving only the savable and salvaging only the salvageable and prepares his battalions for the coming war with wine and food and the sex of women but oh to scratch his eyes and scratch his eyes and scratch his beautiful crystal eyes with his own nails and leave him regretting his insolence with the broken heart of a man in love with a woman for whom love is a war not the girls who spit in his face only to return crying and begging to let themselves exist as entertainment

and color to his resistances and his broad, strong back and neck but oh the fates spinning and spiraling and weaving one for one will bring him the pain of a man who dreams of cruelty instead of ecstasy of cruelty instead of ecstasy of cruelty instead of ecstasy of a broken back and a snapped neck and the floating shimmering trail of a white dress to follow on hands and knees for eternity yes he poses now the picture of calm while beneath we three he sees the wake of blood and mud and death and wood like a cat bringing into the home a dead bird to show his master the effects of hard work and a talent for murder oh how the last breaths of the tiny traps of lands dying slowly are spent on inaudible warnings shouted in vain into the vapor of the wake dear god not to underestimate the white lights of wrath and the poor, poor, poor traps left behind living to rebuild and restart the dreadful cycle of the season are ambassadors of the destruction of the white fates and oh how he must know by now that the girls are gone today sucked out to sea with their skinny bones and he waits in his loneliness for the women who sucked them out to sea and left them dwindling alone crying out for a man their man whose hair they stroked with their fingers on hands designed to fan him when he grows hot and when he grows cold to build with bricks and mortar the harem to ignite the fire in his lustful body and color him with the delicacy of the delicate and oh once he's had these girls how he'll yearn to hold our wrists and pin us to his bed and let us writhe in resistance until we tire but how we won't tire will grow stronger will grow stronger will grow stronger and send shooting pains into his arms until they break off of him like crow's feet and he screams and we mount him and pin his torso to the ground and bite and crush and break him and bite and crush and break him and bite and crush and break him and he remembers what it means to be in the sophisticated company of complex women yes to think that he knows as he stands now passive and pensive and stares out into the gentle breeze and creeping darkness that takes his shores today and gives him the gift of a beautiful evening before the crushing chaos takes hostage that smirking arrogance of a shore made strong by the looming shadow of the inland over his shoulder holding his handle firmly with les grosse grosse mains like the mitts of Hephaestus forging in fire the strength of the ancient armory but oh how tomorrow he falls at the hands of the white sentries of Poseidon who rip the water from the sea floor like bed sheets and suffocate the sons of savages as they gasp for dying breaths in the drowning whiteness oh how we know the blood surges through his arms today and his eyes squint and he stands tall and firm with the sexual salivation of an animal ready to sink his teeth into his prey and oh how he thinks fear is for the weak and not the wary and how he tempts so boldly the white fates to grab from him his weapons and with the strength of a squall send them shooting back at his face and ripping gashes into his cheeks and neck and chest to watch them ooze into the ocean and gurgle in the white wake we leave behind us for another man made strong by the ombre de ton pere another man we will break like we broke this one the handsome one who humored himself he could handle real women when girls were all he knew girls

we sucked into the sea like we will his throttling manhood oh not long now ladies it is time to finish picking our teeth with the bones of the tiny traps and set our sights on conjuring the tides to our breasts and breathing in to blow out when the light rises to meet us once more and the man will puff his chest at our arrival oh gather the power to your strong spiralling bones and stare fixedly into to the dark for like the wooden gates in the roman coliseums the dark will rise and lions will burst forth towards the gladiators ripping them limb from limb until the once noble men will look unrecognizable to the fathers who held so much confidence in their sons come ladies come for morning approaches and by nightfall all that will be heard is the wretched gurgling of a once strong man made weak by girls made too weak for women like we three women awake we women allons-y les dames awake awake awake for the dawn is breaking the dawn is breaking the dawn is breaking.

## Chapter 8

Thirteen-year-old Stephanie Gonzalez had puffy lips and long, thick eyelashes, a flat chest and the hint of some thickening thighs peeking out from under her green uniform skirt, gifts from her curvy mom, smooth, almost pale skin and slightly curly black-as-night hair, none of which distinguished her as much as the combination of her chubby baby cheeks and a tiny, turned-up button nose that made her look like an angel, which is probably why RNZO, or then seventeen-year-old Lorenzo Calabria, spray painted her smirking, cherubic face over two fat green tits with day glo purple nipples the size of soccer balls, and a pair of silver wings big as cars on the western-facing wall of the free clinic on North Miami Avenue and 38<sup>th</sup> street, a disgusting, offensive homage which secretly pleased Stephanie when she was thirteen, look how hot she'd be as long as she kept the weight out of her stomach, maybe one of those Pilates balls or something, (the first time she ever fingered herself, after school in the bathtub, no water just the only room in the house with a lock, she imagined Lorenzo sitting in his piece of shit car across the street from the clinic, jerking his big brown veiny, uncut cock to the sight of her voluptuous green titties), but made her slowly sadder every day her real tits never came in, despite the promise of her mother's enormous melon breasts, and as hard as it was to be the only seventeen-year old Latina girl in the neighborhood without at least cute perky little things, the size of the tits in RNZO's piece, protected forever by his cousin's loose affiliations with a local gang, not to mention Lorenzo's growing reputation as a bad ass (the first time her mom saw the wall, so clearly her baby, she stormed into his parents' house, into his room, no joke, to start screaming at him in Spanish, only to come back visibly shaken up by his response, no hands on her to be sure, she used to be friends with his mom, but definitely more than a simple "fuck you," although she never actually told the story, just said a lot had changed in the boy since he was the polite eleven-year-old she remembered), made this massive mural seem cruel, as though her face had been Photoshopped

onto some gorgeous KING magazine model, and she knew once that bitch Lena first pointed out the irony, everyone one would remind her of her mosquito bites every time they walked by, which was everyday seeing as the clinic was standing exactly in between the school and the 7-11 at 38<sup>th</sup> street where everyone bought cigarettes and tried to buy beer, and where she saw RNZO and his boys leaning on their cars, and she'd keep her head down (Lorenzo's infatuation with Stephanie went very quickly from wife and mother of his children to hate-fuck that prissy bitch after she told him that although she thought he was cute, she was only twelve and her mom would kill her if they even kissed, as her mom got pregnant with her when she was sixteen and she was raised not to make the same mistake, though as she had this long, revelatory conversation with him, she stills remembers thinking "...although I'd let your cousin do whatever he wanted to me, cuz he probably wouldn't ask me if he could," though the new RNZO didn't seem like he was the type to ask, either) until she was sure no one could see her so she didn't have to cry now the only thing left was to hope that the massive hurricane Irene coming their way would leave her house and her uncle's house and her friends' houses untouched and somehow strike down on the mural with a bolt of lightning, leaving her face and tits charred and burned so no one would look at it and wonder what if, what if she really looked like that now, what if this angel really did exist, what if Stephanie wasn't the prissy bookish girl who kept her head down when she saw trouble but one of those gorgeous hood girls who yelled back at the guys and ripped the hats off their heads and made scenes in public in front of the shoe store and had guys roll up to her in their shitty cars and tell her how good she looked and that they wanted to take her out on a date and she could go tell them to suck a dick, son, and walk on, happy, but no with the scars of singed concrete and chipping, flaking spray paint she was a nobody and she could keep her head down and do well in school and go to UM, there were always UM people at her school, hood outreach or something, and become a mathematician or a doctor and forget about the assholes in this neighborhood, who would get fat and ugly and get shot or hooked on drugs and would call her their smart kid sister when she came back and tease her about being so smart and like a doctor, saving lives and shit but she swore to herself that day that if Irene failed her, like so many had, she would go to the Home Depot in Hialeah and get ten bottles of different color spray paints and draw a fat veiny dick coming out of her mouth and a curly moustache on her top lip and a beautiful, Gucci two piece bathing suit over her naked body or maybe she'd just cover the whole fucking thing, erasing it totally, covering her humiliation like a corpse at a crime scene with a sheet of perfect, gorgeous white that gave the clinic back its clean, antiseptic hope.

12:16 PM

**Asher:** how many pages

double spaced, 2 inch margins

**me:** 27 single spaced

**Asher:** cool

**me:** yea

yesterday took a weird turn

**Asher:** so in a book thatd prob be like 60?

**me:** yea

12:17 PM

now i have lebron james fighting the hurricanes  
which are actually three ancient scorned women  
oh and one of the main characters in a building  
shit is bizarre

12:18 PM

i promised myself its the last thing ill write about -----

**Asher:** ha

## Chapter 9

What should I do? Should I board up the windows? Should I turn off the breakers? This storm will be a big one, a category four. Winds coming in at a 120 mph. Coastal flooding. I just don't know if I can lose everything again. I should take a trip, maybe to Spain or China, but the kids start pre-season this week and I said this year I'd be around more. Should I leave town? Take a contract in another city? The house is great, got the whole place rigged up for internet and there's a movie theater and an incredible pool and a view of the bay. The dogs love the Grove, plenty of little lizards to eat up. The kids love Miami. Lots of friends in school, and the kids are nice to them, don't give them too much hell. And football, who knows? Maybe they could be football stars. They've had a hard year, moving and everything that went on. So tell me, what are my options?

What should I do? Should I stop my brain from thinking, from worrying? I woke up in the middle of the night last night to a nightmare. I dreamt that I left the house for a weekend just by myself. Didn't tell anyone I was going, just took the plane to an island somewhere warm and posted up for a couple days to wait out the storm. No girls or kids or press, just me. A dream. When I got back from my trip, the whole place was torn up. I mean torn up. Coconut Grove looked like the pictures of Haiti after the storm there. Palm trees in the pool, shards of glass everywhere. I walked into the kitchen of my house and felt the outside air blowing. The whole waterfront face of my house had been ripped off and I saw my kids' toys bobbing up and down and bumping against the edges of the hot tub. Upstairs I heard whimpering, so I called out but no one answered. The whimpering sound got louder and louder as I climbed the stairs. I kept calling for them but I couldn't hear anyone. I heard some sniffing from behind the alcove closet. I saw my people, LaFamilia, my boys and their mom and the friends I brought with me from Ohio and my agent and my day-to-day all hiding under the stairs to the second floor, scared and wet and shaking and waiting for

me to save them. I remember it so clearly. They were gray, like from an old movie. I was in color, the house was in color, but my people were gray like they had no life left in them. They looked up at me in fear, not relief, like I was a monster, and when I grabbed them all in my arms they passed out and the weight of them falling brought me to my knees. When I woke up I was sweating, soaking like the hurricane already hit me. Felt like playing Madden but I couldn't find the disk so I tried to go back to bed.

I've been sitting in my living room all day watching the weather channel. I got my white socks and flip-flips Big Boi style but I'm not really relaxed at all. Cuba got shook up, Haiti's in trouble. Maybe I can send them all some money down there. Start an event to raise money like a celebrity basketball game in Port-au-Prince. Better wait to see how bad Miami gets it. I am not a weatherman. Should I give you a history lesson? In 1926, a hurricane rocked Miami, killing 372 reported people, probably more because there were lots of undocumented people rolling through Miami around then. Could I save lives, could I stop the destruction?

What should I do? Should I lower my shoulder and run head on towards her? Plow her out of the way? One quick move and I could get on her left side and move the hurricane out east, leaving her dying in the cold water, away from the city, my city. Cut this thing down now before it tears up the Carolinas, maybe New York. I've been doing nothing but working out all day and running, running like crazy. Think I could stick and move with the storm? How could I not? We'll get the press in on it. I can see the ads now, like those old boxing posters, Hagler vs. Hearns. Me with my hands up, her with hers. The King versus the 'Cane. Brawl on the beach. Pay-per-view. Only in America, only in America. I love it. I could last twelve rounds with her. I got handspeed. And this shoulder, well, ask your boy.

Should I not be so cocky? What should I do if the Cane takes two long, slow pasty strides past me to the west and shatters the heart of this city before I get a chance to recover? What if her bench is deep and she just keeps coming at me, blowing me back? Who gives a fuck if they held the after party at the club. Every team does that when they win away. That's so crazy to me. And what if I fail? All those people depending on me to take this thing down. Who else could they blame but me? They would love that I bet.

What if I won? Watch that happen, watch me kill this storm myself, rip its arms and legs right off and have people hate me for it. Say I didn't look humble enough when I collapsed on shore, bloody and bruised up, holding its head from its hair. Savannah got me an eBook for my birthday with all these books pre-loaded onto it. After I couldn't fall back to sleep last night, I started reading this book about a guy who is just walking around one day and everyone starts

messing with him. He gets arrested and when he asks what he did no one gives him a real answer. No one ever answers his questions. It's all just words that made no sense, like how you can't read in a dream. I felt that, one year ago I felt that. One day you're the face, the hero and the next you can see the spark in everyone's eyes like all along they were ready to hate you. Like even when they love you they're waiting for you to fall. And no one will tell you why. A whole life of feeling crazy for being sane. Coach K.

But its not a book. Its something in their bodies from birth made them programmed to hate you but all this time they needed one little matchstick. And once they hate you, that's it, you never get them back. No matter how much charity work you do or how much money you bring to a city. No matter how long you stay in a bad situation. I thought here was different. That here they'd love me. Miamians understand money, they understand business. Maybe I should just quit. Maybe I should leave town. I'm not a hero. I'm no champion. I can't save everyone.

When this storm comes, maybe I'll move out of the way and let the whole thing tear Miami to pieces. Maybe I should just disappear.

## Chapter 10

JP wore his passion and craft on his face, the way Spartan soldiers walked around with their shirts off. JP had a giant, straight nose that cast a shadow on the rest of his already dark features. There wasn't any arab blood in his lineage, but his eyes and the color of his skin betrayed a north African past. Just one of the many forms beauty can take in French culture. The thing that struck Daniel immediately about this obviously handsome man was how he dressed. JP dressed cool. He had spent a couple of years between Paris, New York and Miami and while all the other gay French perfumers wore three button suits straight and perfect Italian leather shoes, JP wore denim chambray, tight slacks, and, when he was allowed, sneakers, which gave him away as a European football fan. He was a bit under 6 feet and his black hair was shorn close to his head. When he opened his mouth, it became clearer that he liked guys, but he dressed like every cool straight man Daniel had ever met, though there weren't many. When JP had a meeting with a client, which was only once a week at most, he wore a simple and casual khaki suit with a light blue shirt and brown leather shoes. More than once did Daniel find himself envious at the style JP possessed. Only once, recently, Daniel saw JP dress to the nines. Daniel heard from John that JP was going to be the head perfumer on the new ----- cologne. To this point he had only worked as a consultant, or as a part of a team. This was huge. He was still young, and the company had some big old guns running the show. Still, everyone knew he was a talent, and if they could keep him, the future of the company. And this guy was going to walk into Daniel's South Miami apartment.

The first thing you noticed walking into Daniel's apartment was how dark it was. The small, drywalled thing originally belonged to UM and served as a dorm. When the school expanded westward, these dorms were no longer necessary, except in providing nerdy bachelors the dork dungeon of their dreams. The thin, colorful blankets that covered the windows let in a bit of light, enough to see, but that was it. In the middle of the long back wall was a large flat-screen television that announced its presence as the most important object in the room. Underneath the television, visible in the darkness, were seven or eight tiny, colored lights, blinking or pulsing, like eyes in the jungle.

The systems, the speakers, the wireless controllers, the amplifiers. In a ten foot UHaul, Daniel and his roommate had brought down from New Jersey two bags of clothes each, a coffee table, a couch, a rug, a record player, two crates of records, three giant bongos and every gaming system made in the last ten years, with a hard drive filled with role playing, sports and fighting games. Also, enough marijuana to get them high every day after work for at least three months. The trip was a paranoid nightmare, but worth it, once everything was set up and optimized. Once the rock band drums were properly calibrated, the extra characters Daniel had bought for Mortal Combat were transferred over to their new place, when the speakers had a setting designed specifically for Halo, and the Wii nunchucks and steering wheels for Mario Kart had their home inside the ottoman. Everything was online these days, but Daniel still waiting in line outside the nearest Gamestop the day before the new Halo or Beatles Rock Band arrived, because he did that in New Jersey and it made him feel less homesick.

In retrospect, if Jean-Phillipe had been more patient, or Daniel more assertive, the story might have ended there. On their way in from the cigarette terrace, Jean-Phillipe trapped Daniel in the stairwell and introduced himself.

I'm sorry this is a strange question to ask you but do you have any pot?

Excuse me?

Pot. Um, weed.

Daniel began to blush and leak into the wall behind him.

It's just that I need it today, man. Can you understand? I'm desperate, man.

After nodding through that last comment, his voice finally presented itself.

Um, yea. I...I guess I could bring you some tomorrow?

Mmm, man yea that sounds super good but I really need right now, for tonight, you know?

I don't really know what to tell you. I mean, I have some, but it's at my house and...

Where's your ouse?

Sorry?

Where is your house. Do you live on the beach?



Um...no, I live near UM.

Perfect! We can drive over, yes? I mean, it's far?

No, it's close.

Great. Thank you, man. You saved my life. And I'll pay for it. Can we meet here at 6?

All French men love weed.

## Chapter 11

It was dark out now. He woke up and thought it might be nearing morning, but Irma wasn't in bed. Just a nap, he thought and breathed in a heavy sigh that rose the bedspread on his belly. At some point he must have gotten cold and went under the covers. He lay there now, with his eyes closed, and could feel Irma close. Maybe she was pressing the button to open the garage gate or maybe she was still on Collins and stopping at the Liquor store to buy them some wine. Maybe she was coming up the elevator, which always smelled like some kind of gummy candy to him. Maybe she was in the hallway with her keys out. Maybe that's what he was hearing.

He remembered thinking, in the between of sleep and waking, that he wished she would walk in, put the bags on the countertop near the stove, where she always did, and walk immediately into the bedroom. Without saying a word, he wished she would crawl in with all of her clothes on, in a daze of sleepiness, and find her part of the bed they still shared, truly shared. In her silence he would know that she did, in fact, see the sliding glass window and that he was asleep with his clothes on and instead of worrying about him, would snuggle close to him as the gentle, cool sea breeze blew in through the living room. The two would stay awake, eyes closed and every now and then kiss each other's forehead to show they were still there, still with the other.

Irma is cold now, the wind is chilling her bones. She is breathing heavily yet silently and rubbing her forehead into his body.

She started to mumble a prayer. It is not Spanish. It is not English.

Ave maria gratia plena dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus et benedictus fructus ventris tui iesus sancta maria, mater dei ora pro nobis peccatoribus nunc et in hora mortis nostrae Amen.

The wind began to pick up and now the door was beginning to open wider. There were magazines on the coffee table, which were flapping open to random pages on the landscape architecture of Coconut Grove and the Art Deco modernity of the famous South Beach hotels and the power of Britto and his

colorful legacy. Flap, flap. The wind died down a bit and they could hear the tapping of the rain on the marble tiles as the weather began to tiptoe into the apartment.

The next thing Vicente felt was the throbbing of the walls under the strain of the wind. The cupboards clapped shut and swung open again and the vases shattered with high-pitched screams like banshees on hitting the wet floor. Irma was scared and breathing heavily almost panting but kept her eyes closed and her body close to Vicente's. She was being as strong as she could and he stroked the side of her sweating and moved the plastered hair from over her eyes.

When the walls finally went they spat at Irma and Vicente with wet slabs of drywall, first with long ripped sheets and then the tiny shards, the last pieces still clinging to the aluminum studs. The two were fully covered in the white and grey drywall, like two healthy bodies barely visible beneath the dead, dried white skin flakes. Vicente could feel the water dripping through the cracks. The ceiling was going and the Vicente grabbed Irma's pinned hand in his. She was breathing harder now, but she was still with him. He told her to fall asleep. She said she couldn't but he repeated it now and her exhaustion was becoming too much to fight. If she fell asleep, she would not wake up, but he would be soon to follow and this way he could hold her body in his, so she wouldn't feel the pain of the collapsing ceiling while she slept.

The ceiling fan dropped, and Vicente began to pray. He didn't want to be saved, he only wanted to pray, to give the end of his life the dignity of a man ready to go, in the arms of his beautiful wife, who smelled like Miami. The ceiling gave way. Vicente jerked up from his sleep at the sound of the door closing. The room was silent. He couldn't breathe.

## Chapter 12

### An Appeal to the County of Miami-Dade

Hello and good afternoon. My name is Charles Delano and for twenty years, I worked as the head atmospheric scientist and meteorologist for the Florida office of National Hurricane Center. I would like to thank this board for giving me its time; I know things are chaotic as we prepare ourselves for Irene. Do believe me, though, when I say that the news with which I have come here today is of the utmost importance and could prove useful in not only preparation for this and future hurricanes but the prevention and manipulation of them as well. Though I retired from the NHC some time ago, I have continued my studies on hurricane behavior as a sort of hobby. I assure you that interior of my Coral Gables home, which has been my home since birth, looks more like a research laboratory than the home of a single man and I can promise that I treat all of my storm findings

with the same gravity and sincerity with which I treated my twenty years at the NHC.

It has become clear to me, gentlemen and lady of the board, that hurricane Irene is not a typical storm, one that Miamians are used to around the end of August every year. I do not mean this solely in terms of power, though Irene promises to be a real threat in terms of wind-speed and rain volume. After vigorously tracking her movement, spying the damage she has caused already and having heard the shrieks from the black-box recorders of the planes she has downed, I can, without question, say that this is not an ordinary storm.

I mean more to say that Irene is actually not a hurricane at all, but the spirits of three ancient female souls who never found rest and yearn to destroy the face of the man who, according to myth, spurned each one of them for the other, until spurning the last for a young girl, no older than fourteen years old. Please do not treat me as a man who has lost his nerve. Were this an ordinary storm, I would suggest practical means of combating it. This I did every day for twenty years at the NHC. But, dear board, you must believe me when I say that Irene is, in face, three very pissed off deities bound together in hurricane form and headed for the coast with the fury of a thousand broken hearts.

I understand your suspicions. I must seem like an old quack running around with conspiracy theories of the Mayan apocalypse or something silly like that. When my wife left, she blamed the storms. I was, in her mind, obsessed with the idea that it was my duty to warn the world of the apocalyptic storm I saw in our future. I told her, though, that one is only obsessed with facts when confronted with blind ignorance worth shining light to. My friends and colleagues, the white fates of lore are back and are ready to plow into this city like no other storm has before. If my calculations are accurate, Irene could make the Miami hurricane of 1926 look like the pissing of a small dog on an incredibly resolute boulder.

Before you throw me out of here and lock me up in chains, please listen to this one final plea. There are two ways out of this disaster, and neither of them is particularly difficult. This is still the south, a land founded and flourishing on superstitions and voodoo. The public will not hold against you your attempts to save our city, even if they seem strange and ineffective. They may not understand, but disaster inspires faith in even the most stubborn. If, however, you do not heed my warnings and do not take the small, simple precautionary measures I suggest, will they be so forgiving as to say you tried your best? Or will the city riot against you, for your lack of faith, your lack of guts at the thought of trying something new. Let me just now explain the two methods of averting this tragedy, and I will have said my peace and can go begin to pack my things and leave town.

The fates are filled with contempt, not only for the man who spurned them all, but for the young girl who tempted the man away from the third and banded them together in mutual violent loathing. According to myth, the man took her as his own because she was so young and beautiful and had not yet been touched by a man before. Which brings me to my point. The first solution, is to, on the shores of Miami Beach, moments before the white fates arrive, is, plainly speaking, to sacrifice a virgin.

The second way, the more difficult way, is to find a champion, one who can best the fates with the brute strength of a man only part mortal. Legend says this man must possess the strength and speed of five normal men, or at least three pretty big ones. On the day the storm arrives, this champion must greet the storm as an equal and propose battle. If the furies accept, the battle will begin on the beach and will last the entire dark, wind-blown day. At the end, if we have selected the proper champion as our ambassador, he will have vanquished his foe, gained the furies love and only then will they forget about the man who once spurned all three of them. Find the champion, and save the city.

Lady and Gentlemen, these are your two options in my humble yet qualified position. I wait with bated breath to hear your decision and beg you to remember that this is moment for better-safe-than-sorry. The world is still a mystery, do not forget that.

Thank you.

### Chapter 13

Had he given her his card? He thought so. The mouth on her, he thought, and a shiver ran through his spine when he realized he was comparing her to his mother, while simultaneously thinking about taking her dress off. It was a violent shiver, a shake, and if someone had been watching him from another car driving by, they would have thought he had tourettes. She was so Miami, showing off the curves, talking about her money and how perfectly smart her kids were. Still when she started cursing about horrible Florida drivers, he found himself laughing hard, like he hadn't laughed since getting to Miami.

When the Soho Beach House accepted his piece "Dirty Darling" and gave him the one thousand dollar value to the hotel, Mickey spent five hundred not-free dollars on new clothes, clothes without paint on them. When the credit from the painting was gone, there would be no real way to be there. Ordering one beer and only sitting down to eat with people you knew would cover the bill wasn't classy. It was fraudulent and he already felt like a fake in that place. He had to stretch the credit, so he mostly sat on the beach and hit the sauna. If he hadn't bought anything in awhile, he would get himself a sazerac and smoke a cigarette

at the bar. As almost always happened, one of his rich acquaintances would come in and insist he dine with them. When the bill came he faked a fight and thanked the patron profusely for his generosity. "One day I'll sell a million-dollar piece and then dinner's on me."

This night though, he got hit hard with the bill. Everyone reached for his or her card, and, as if in some cruel joke, everyone won. When the older couples began passing the check back and forth, cutely figuring out how much the two of them owed the group, Mickey realized he was fucked. "God knows how much the wine was, we must have had six bottles." The after-dinner scotches he ordered at the bar were a fuck you to wealth, to property and to the Soho Beach House. "Fuck that dinner, the food wasn't even that good. Fuck this place and its turn-away policy. "Fuck you Mickey, for being both kinds of elitist. Strangely, blowing a gaping hole through his credit in one night made Mickey believe he belonged there for the first time. The weather suited his clothes, and, feeling a little tipsy, he headed upstairs to one of the many bars. The party he found there was a calm one, but he could tell it was a mixed crowd. No one seemed to notice he wasn't invited, maybe because no one was. He had gotten himself another scotch when his phone rang. It was Mina. Mina from LA. He tried being cool but he could barely hear her and his yelling into the phone was starting to attract some attention. He stepped out onto the balcony, but the call was almost gone. He could feel eyes on him, so instead of screaming a goodbye into the phone, he faked a cute goodbye. His move was to look out into the ocean. Then he could tell her he was an artist and it would make total sense.

"Wait, she gave me hers," and he threw his hand into the back seat looking for his jacket. At the time he had winced when she went into her purse looking for her card to give to him. It seemed to him so Miami to do that, go reaching for your card as soon as you meet someone. He thought everything in Miami was so Miami. Yea, this was definitely her card. He remembered her talking about the dealership, like she actually owned every one of those incredible cars. It reminded him of the gallery, of the people who showed the work like it was made for them, or infinite taste and money had made it clear it could belong to no one else. For a second he hated her. She was proud of her terrible life, proud of having a piece-of-shit ex-husband who threw money at her like she was property. He wanted to call her, see if she wanted to grab a nightcap, maybe at her place. "What the fuck was up with those butch asshole guys." Was he going to get his ass kicked for trying to sleep with her? Fuck it, could be a cool story. I bet she's loaded.

He tried her once. She didn't pick up. He called again. Did he really like her?

"Hello."

"Hi, this is Mickey. We met just a couple hours ago, at the Soho House. The painter?"

"Yes, I remember."

He felt that one a little.

"I wanted to say that I was sorry for just leaving the balcony like that and I wanted to buy you a drink and say that I'm sorry properly."

This was his line. It worked almost half of the time.

"Well, I just got home, but I'm actually rushing out again."

"Oh, where are you going?"

In a panic, he went back to small-talk mode. She was silent on the other end.

"Um alright, yea why not you can come over. All I have is wine though, and maybe a beer, so if you want something else you should buy it."

"Wine is perfect. What's the address?"

He was headed north. On his way he passed nice house after nice house. Not exactly the studio in Hialeah. This was Bal Harbour, he thought. He was wrong. It wasn't.

When he first arrived at his new studio space, he hadn't even seen pictures of it. The gallery set it up and the landlord seemed like a nice guy, but was a flake, and hadn't sent on the pics he promised he would. Mick didn't care, he was ready to leave LA, his bags were packed. The studio was right near the airport, and the cab cost hardly anything. The space is gorgeous, he thought, a whole warehouse. More space than he could ever use. Two gigantic rooms with 20 ft ceilings. When he got out of the airport, he saw a missed call and a message from the landlord. "By the way," he said, "the plumber is coming in a couple days to fix the pipe and turn the water back on. Until then, there's a Home Depot across the street with a public bathroom and a small store with water bottles and things around the block. You shouldn't have any problems." The way he said it was as though it was the most normal thing in the world.

After settling in a bit and laying out the first box of paints on a scrawny metal table left over, Mickey got hungry. It was a beautiful day, hot, but he was used to that. He locked the front gate, and started walking. The area around him was too residential for a restaurant; there was a strip club a couple blocks away but that was about it. The highway was not far away though, and he didn't need much, maybe a shitty, fast-food chicken sandwich or something. When he approached the highway, he saw one giant white gas station and nothing else. Maybe just a Clif bar then. Inside the gas station, to his surprise, was an entire hot food section run by two women, maybe a mother and daughter, both Cuban, he assumed, incorrectly.

The daughter was pretty, huge tits, he thought. What if he started seeing her? If she stayed in the studio? They had crazy sex, she wore his smocks when she got

up from the bed to pee. What an ass. She couldn't have been older than nineteen. Jesus, Mick, control yourself.

"Excuse me?" He had his smirk on. "Can you tell me what this is right here?"

"Ox tail."

"And this?"

"Chicken."

"Would it be ok if I asked you to just make me a plate of what you think is the best?" Paired with a smirking smile, this was a line of his.

She didn't say a word, just looked down and scooped out two scoopfuls of yellow rice in a Styrofoam box. Next, she switched to tongs and pulled apart a limb of baked chicken by the bone. The bone slid out at her pull, leaving the meat wading in the thick brown sauce speckled with oil pools of orange. She grabbed for the rest of the drumstick and flopped it down on the yellow rice.

"And some plantains, please."

When he got the food back to the studio, he devoured it while watching an episode of 30 Rock on his computer. The food was too greasy to eat with his hands, so he used the tiny plastic cutlery and wiped his mouth with the small white napkins. Chicken and Quakerstate, great start, he thought, but the food was strikingly tasty and he ate every bite. After the episode was over, he wiped his hands and mouth and put the box and the napkins in the white plastic bag, took the last sip of Diet Coke and chucked that in as well. He typed in the address of a porn site and unbuckled his belt. He liked to spend a long time browsing the videos, looking for that perfect girl. He liked the young looking ones, the foreign ones, maybe Hungarian or Hispanic.

Midway through he felt his stomach go sour and a sharp pain drain the blood from his face. He pushed through, jerking violently, until he came, only really half satisfied. The pain in his stomach would go away for a minute and then push again on the waist band of the soiled boxers he just pulled back up. Ach fuck! And a wave of chills washed over him. The chicken, that fucking chicken.

He looked around, he couldn't go here. The water wasn't on, there wasn't even any in the toilet yet. His stomach settled for a moment. He shot out of his chair, pulled up his jeans and slipped on some sneakers. He grabbed the keys and headed out. Home Depot was just across the street, but the entrance was on the other side and the building was enormous. He walked with purpose through the landscaped patches of shrubbery, thinking that running would push him over the edge.

The first step he took into the parking lot was the one. He didn't even feel the levees break exactly. But he felt the water running down the back of his legs. He struggled still, squeezing his cheeks together, trying to hold in the main load, but

there wasn't one. Whatever was in was coming out. He was shitting himself, in the parking lot of the Home Depot in Hialeah.

The rain was coming down now and he was having trouble seeing. He called her back for more directions, the rain had started up again and it was hard to see anything. When he pulled up into the driveway she was waiting for him in the door, wearing sweats and drinking a beer. None of the lights in the house were on.

"Your car is a piece of shit."

When he got to the door, they started kissing. She grabbed his hand and pulled him inside. He knew what was happening. He couldn't help it but he started talking, knowing full well she just wanted sex. He was being that thing he hated, the boy talking his way out of sex, the boy who talked a big game and couldn't handle a direct woman. God, how pathetic. Still, he just wanted to hear her talk shit about the Marlins or the heat up in North Carolina, or the Florida drivers again. Yea.

She gave it to him, the eye-rolls, the shut up and fuck me looks, but she was lying too, he thought. She offered him another glass of wine, she did him the service of switching over to wine as well, and the two sat up on the living room couch, kissing and talking about the ridiculousness of their situation.

She told him what a dick he was for walking away like that, and he told her how dumb it was to talk about her ex-husband to a young, good-looking guy like him who was, he swore, interested from the very first time he saw her. She apologized for propositioning him and admitted it probably wasn't the best way to get him to come home, but she was truly quite proud of her move, cutting through the bullshit. He got at least three more pieces of information about the guys at the bar. He wasn't prying, but he was. He was waiting for her to say the words "mob," "mafia," "shady" as in shading dealings, but she didn't. From her mouth, the men sounded more like bodyguards who took liberties with her privacy, ends justifying the means as they did. While she was talking though, he was imagining another life. To his ears, it sounded as though her ex-husband got out of Miami to avoid some bad people and those bad people, while not mobster movie bad, weren't the type to let something go. Maybe the boss wanted her for himself. Great Mick, he thought, you're about to sleep with someone's bargaining chip. She did, however, tell him that if it was just up to her and her husband, the men probably wouldn't find her, as her husband didn't really care that much what she did. This just raised more questions in Mickey's head, but he chose not to press. This was the only topic in the world that could ruin the mood right now. He brought the conversation back to their meeting. He confessed faking the call, kind of. She jumped up.

"I fucking knew it!"



He wanted to tell her about Mina, the girl he left in LA. He always sounded so good, he thought, incorrectly, when talking about past loves. It made him sound insightful, as though his life was rich with experience despite his age. It didn't. He was completely over Mina, and could talk about her affectionately without it being 'a guy talking about his ex.' He wasn't and couldn't. Mina was an angel but the two of them just wanted different things. What bullshit. He was, truly, honestly, he told her, happy to be on this couch with her. He was. This was his move. The blushing confession about how happy he was at the moment, his face red like a child, giggling and looking down sheepishly. Sorry, he'd say, should have kept that one to myself. Gold. He was starting to fall for her. He was, though this he kept to himself. He was also drunk.

They laughed at the awkwardness of the other, and Mickey sat up to refill their glasses. He heard a crack, not like glass, but like a plastic bowl popping and shattering. The skylight had gone, and water was leaking through.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck. Shit, ok let me call the guy for this. God knows he's not still up."

Mickey had already gone into cabinet under the sink and was ripping up garbage bags as she spoke. He asked her if there was an easy way to get onto the roof. He grabbed some packaging tape, the only thing she had, some scissors and his shoes. It wasn't a dangerous or particularly difficult procedure, but he wrapped the broken skylight with three garbage bags, and made sure the rain wouldn't leak into the house anymore. When he came downstairs, soaking wet, without even asking, he grabbed a mop and dried the spot. Then he got a towel from the bathroom and rubbed his head down. She just stood there watching him. It was a singular feeling, knowing that she was looking at him, impressed. She might say that he was showing off, or give him a faux-girlie "my hero," but she thought it was sweet, he knew it, and she liked him, he knew it. Should he take the shirt off? It was wet...He liked her, he knew it and now he couldn't wait to grab her ass again and pick her up and bring her to her room and lead.

She wanted the lights out. His favorite part was seeing her, but she wanted the lights out, which he thought was cute. The tough, fuck-me and get the fuck out woman wanted the lights out. Her sweats were off, he took them off when he first put her down, but he remembered not to take off her bra or panties right away. A girl he trusted once told him that women were always, no matter who they were, disappointed when guys immediately undressed a girl completely. All women, she explained, love the way they look in underwear. That's why we choose it, she said. We can't choose our bodies, and most women would probably make a lot of changes if they could. Get a girl hot with her underwear on, and this was the part he remembered the best, and she'll take off the rest for you when she's ready. This one, he thought, was one of those women, and he didn't make a move for the bra. When he dropped her on the bed, he sat back

with her calves in his hands and looked at her. She didn't jump up to him or cover up. He was right, and whether or not she was thinking it, she really did look incredible in her underwear.

He leaned over to kiss her, she could feel his dick hard on the inside of her thigh. He was getting harder, he began to breathe harder and paw at her body. He pulled one cup of her bra down below her nipple and grabbed her whole breast in his hand. She pulled away from his kiss and said it.

"Can we turn out the lights?"

He smiled and did what he was told.

When the lights were off, he got back on top of her and started kissing her neck with wet kisses near her ears and on her shoulders. Don't go into the ear yet, he thought. Then you've got nothing left. He remembered something else. If the tone is hot and heavy, his friend said to him, like, if you picked her up and you guys are kissing deeply and breathing a lot, and this is the first time you're sleeping together, then skip the foreplay. Just go straight to sex. Going down a girl can stress her out, and if you're hard, she probably doesn't feel like going down on you so just do it. You can work in the other stuff later. The first time should be quick, well reasonably quick. This was a head-scratcher, so he asked her to elaborate. That thing about it lasting all night is kind of a myth. You can start again once it's done, which can be nice, but a passionate first sex should be passionate all the way through, and that doesn't exactly equal hour-long sex.

When she began feeling for his dick over her boxers he quickly pulled her panties down her legs, and she helped him by lifting her hips off of the bed. While he pulled down his boxers, she rolled over and reached into the nightstand drawer. She pulled out a single condom, knowing well that he didn't have any. When the condom was on, he pushed inside her and she let out a small noise and closed her eyes.

She wouldn't be writing about this one in her diary, he thought. Probably too fast for her. Do older women keep diaries? Do any women keep diaries? She was sweating, though, and her heart was racing and he did a pretty decent job, he thought. She made some noises and he didn't seem too goofy. At one point he even flipped her over, and it felt natural. When it went to doggy, he didn't have a chance of lasting, but overall, a good first one. A base coat. A primed canvas. She wasn't going to blow smoke up his ass about it, but he knew she wouldn't lie. She didn't say anything, but she kept kissing him with just her lips, the affectionate way, and lying in his arms. His confidence was back. He jumped up, naked, and fell back down on her chest. He was ready for his pitch.

"Alright, I have a proposal."

He knew how that must sound to a kind-of married woman. She smiled, though, because he was smirking, and his face was as confident as any she had ever seen. "What if we spent entire weekend in this house, waiting out the storm. We won't leave, we'll order food and watch movies and have sex and that's all we'll do and pretend that the world is ending outside and that we have zero responsibilities, except that we make the other one laugh and we make sure we've had plenty to eat and drink. And when the storm is over, we'll go our separate ways and if you don't want to, we don't have to see each other ever again."

She was ready to kiss him.

"No, sorry that's ridiculous. We're not doing that."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't know you at all and that's just ridiculous. I have a shitload to do, the kids get back Sunday night and I wasn't even planning on staying in Miami this weekend. Besides, who says I want to have sex again?"

He got a very, very, very serious look on his face, which made her smile.

"I'm going to ask you that same question again in ten minutes and you're not going to give me that bullshit answer again. You're going to point me in the direction of the take-out menus and teach me how to work that fucking ridiculous remote control thing that looks like a television."

She was smiling.

"Oh yea?"

"Yep."

He threw the top of the duvet over his head and starting kissing down her stomach.

## Chapter 14

I'm scared now. I'm so scared. It's really dark and the wind is picking up. The coffee man downstairs stopped selling coffee and the cook is not cooking. The Japanese man turned off the orange lights and the bookman hasn't been in his store for two days. The woman on the fifth floor isn't selling anything today either. We are all just waiting. My dad says that when it hits, we'll be ok. He said to me that the woman on the fifth floor will be blown away and maybe the Japanese man too and the cook and the coffee man but not me because I'm strong like a rock. I don't feel strong. I feel like a baby. All the stores on Lincoln Road are closed down and the rain made the road very empty. I can see the beach from here and the waves are starting to get bigger. He told me that in a world of glass boxes I am a metal cage and that made me feel better. In a world of glass boxes I am a metal cage. A car is a metal cage with wheels. A prison is a metal cage no one can get out of. I am a metal cage covered in strong rock. Super strong. When the wind blows I can feel the other buildings shaking, but I don't shake an inch. I'm scared. I'm very scared and I wish my dad was here. Oh no, I'm alone. Where did everybody go? Crying is for babies but I think sometimes it's ok to cry because things are sad and scary and it's natural to cry. I'm crying. I'm all wet

and I can feel the wind and it's cold and I'm crying. I feel the people beneath me holding their breath. Oh no oh no. It's thunder and the thunder is so loud and it hurts my ears. One, two, oh no the lightning. I saw it, I saw it. It is not a thousand miles away it is very close to me oh god I'm scared I want dad I want dad. Where is he?

## Chapter 15

Jean-Phillipe knew Orientals. He loved them for their depth and their complicated, unisex beauty. To him, the world didn't really smell of flowers or fruit, it smelled like amber, an umbrella term for mostly synthetic, warm and golden smelling tree resins typical in the middle east and north Africa. For two years now, he harbored an unshakable feeling that the market was headed that way, well, headed back that way, following women's fashion as it always did. Young women wanted to look like men again, the buzz cuts, the "boyfriend" jeans, no jewelry, no make-up, the painter look. For the most part, this meant no perfume as well, just body lotions, but JP refused to fully acknowledge this part of the fact, for that's exactly what it was. He banished it from his thoughts. For JP, it was no leap in logic to assume that soon, young women would want to smell like men too. Old spice. For a time now, the saturation of bubbly, candy tween girls on television and film was pushing college girls, rife with worldly knowledge, to distance themselves from their inner teens, to smell more like their strong mothers and less like their younger sisters. Now, right at this moment, though, young women seemed to want to smell like their older brothers, something JP found particularly twisted and delightful. Every day he saw more and more young women walking curiously through the men's cologne section at Sephora, which killed him a little bit. Without fail, they would be buying something an ex-boyfriend wore, or something that smelled like a locker room, essentially, as was almost always the case with popular men's colognes, something ghastly. He wanted to make *her* something, the girl walking that aisle. Take her hand, tell the Sephora employees to fuck off, and direct her this way, to the new Orientals, to his Oriental.

The company's new client represented the perfect opportunity. The brand wasn't traditionally a perfume brand, in fact, they didn't have any scents, but it was non-traditional enough to try, and smart enough to pay the money to do it right. Established but still young, with no real faux pas' to its name. A good brand, a good name. The executives were smart. They knew what they wanted. And this was how they began the meeting. The new fragrance would represent the entirety of the brand and all of the fragrances to follow. Nothing matronly or stuffy like Chanel or Guerlain, but not trashy like Juicy. When they said this, Jean-Phillipe and his creative director, Christina, shared a look, but neither said a word. The truth they both knew was that many of the Juicy Couture scents were actually quite good, despite the hideously cartoony tween girl bottles and boxes,

and most likely extremely close to what the company was really looking for. They wanted something like what the New York boutiques were doing. They used the word minimalist, but incorrectly, and both Christina and Jean-Phillipe knew not to remember it. The brief had not been delivered yet, though, so no one knew what to expect. JP waited nervously. The team took a ten-minute sushi break and when all returned, the client executive in charge of the soon-to-be scent cut to the chase. She issued the brief to Christina. She and JP shared a look again, this time a slightly surprised and tacitly thrilled one. Easy enough, they thought. The brief was short: "Alice Bovary With A Dragon Tattoo," and brilliant. The emboldened curiosity of a lost little blond girl, the complexly insatiable desire of a trapped French wife and the fuck you of a Swedish hacker dike. Jean-Phillipe wanted to kiss the 20-year old intern who came up with that brief staring up at her bedroom ceiling one night, only to have it stolen by these pant suit execs. A fresh but dirty musk, something amber, sexy, not overwhelming but long lasting, with a smell that changes over time. An Angel variation, probably, but with fewer complications and not quite as potent. Or maybe more amber, like Guerlain. He got to work.

Miami is a city reeking of old perfumes. The aristocratic and aged ladies who populated the cocktail parties JP was forced to attend drowned themselves in Joy or Shalimar, both truly wonderful scents, but dated and when doused generously on skin, gave snobbish Jean-Phillipe an almost allergic reaction. The Cuban ladies who worked at the Perfumania on Lincoln Road pushed Escada, the adoptive smell of the islands. They also, he reminded himself, put Bulgari Black on the men's side of the store, Bulgari Black, one of the top 10 women's perfumes in history. In no city on earth, he thought, except possibly Paris and Marrakesh, is luxury fragrance more present in the air than Miami. On this day though, when he walked outside, all he smelled was the rain, the rain that had fallen and the rain that would. The wind brought the ocean to his nose. The ocean, he thought, a concept done to death, the salty lightness, the exotic flowers to fill in the postcard, the citrus to imply an arid freshness. *Après l'Ondee*. But there was something else he smelled now. It was so sexy to him, and he saw it only as the darkness took the daylight and the far off clouds rained down sheets of water on distant spits of land. Doom. Like the feeling after smoking the first cigarette of the day. The feeling of 5pm on Sundays. If perfume was about anticipation, then this smell was outright threatening. What was it? What was it that he smelled? Mold? The moldy smell of stagnant water? No. Burning? Like cinders? No, closer but still not it. Ah voila. He had it.

Indoles. Those wonderful little creatures, molecules found mostly in Jasmine and Orange Blossom. Indoles smell like decay, found in feces, like death, that give depth to some of the world's great fragrances. Something had gone stale around him. Serge Lutens, he thought, *A La Nuit*. A classic. The ocean didn't smell like Jasmine, it didn't smell like indoles, but Doom did. Rather, the ocean implied

indoles, as did the darkened sky before a storm, or the smell of rain on the horizon. Along with the sweet chocolate, mild amber and citrus forming the base of his newest creation, he would load the drydown with this smell, the smell of aging. Pretending for a moment he understood women at all, he thought, what could be more doomed than a woman aging? It was a cruel thought, and it made him smile.

A124 hit immediately. The client loved it, but had comments. This was the best possible outcome for a perfumer. When designing a base for a new scent, perfumers deliberately make the initial juice something uncomplicated and concrete. Clients expect to make changes, to assert their opinions and their own brand of creativity. They enjoy it, the ownership of creative collaboration. No, the real art of perfumery comes in the fine-tuning, the small changes that turn a pleasant smell into a perfect perfume. So Jean-Phillipe gave them A124, a fresh, chocolate and citrus mix that was almost impossible to smell. They loved it, he knew they would, because it was the base of every young woman's perfume worth a damn. It was the softest sillage of Lolita Lempicka if sprayed on the skin of a virgin. It's not easy to win the clients on the first try, but JP was as good at anticipating a demand as he was at mixing molecules. It was a balancing act. If they loved it, they would call it finished, and it would break his heart, because finished it was not. This is how you get the boring, inoffensive scents that are, in fact, so deeply offensive. Instead, he gave them the hint of a smell they already liked, just a hint, and with their trust he would build something completely different. He wanted them not to love A124, but rather, to love him. With A124, he had the client's faith, the company's money and hundreds of years of smells at his disposal. He had the entirety of the idea, almost as if he carried the separate parts in his pants pocket. He had his Indoles. His Doom. He had time, time to work, the brief was simple enough. Now, thought Jean-Phillipe, I need my chemist.

1:05 PM

**me:** yo

1:06 PM

**Tara:** hey

i was just going to text uu

how r u

**me:** im ok

writing on labor day

so behind

**Tara:** look at u

what u writing?

1:07 PM

**me:** this novel

gotta have it done by saturday

**Tara:** whats it about

**me:** miami

## Chapter 16

The house goes dark. After a twenty count, the main rag is flown and the white frosted lights in the wings slowly fade up. Ted enters from downstage wing stage right. He wears thin loose black pants made of a delicate material that taper down to his ankle. His top is a white tank top that fits tightly to his body. Foot after foot, he walks to center stage, slowly. He is staring directly ahead, to the downstage wing stage left and his eyes are empty. He stops center stage and with a small and natural movement, turns his head and body to face the house. After a twenty count of motionless standing, he begins to raise his arms from his sides. When both of his arms are fully extended outwards and parallel to the stage, he stops and holds this position for five counts. He is standing with his feet shoulder-width apart and his knees are slightly bent. He hold this position as the lights drop out and a single spot remains on him, keeping him illuminated in the darkness.

After thirty counts, the low rumbling of the score fills the space, like the television broadcast of a rocket taking off from its base. Thirty counts into this music, Ted takes in a large, slow breath that fills his chest like a balloon and rotates his shoulders back. This breath lasts for ten counts. As he is breathing in, he tilts his head backwards towards the sky, a slow arc that also lasts ten counts. At the end of the ten, he is staring straight up at the ceiling and his chin is the only part of his head visible to the audience, like a proscenium arch floating over his still-inflated chest. He holds the breath in his body. Ted then waits ten more counts in this held position, arms still extended out from his shoulders, knees slightly bent.

The low rumbling stops suddenly and his arms drop down violently with a slap to the outside of his thighs and, without any will of their own, they bounce against his body with the weight of the fall. Also on this cue, Ted's face falls to meet the audience and he is staring out in the black with wide anticipatory eyes. Immediately on this fall, he begins to exhale forcefully over ten counts, spewing out all of the breath that remained inside of him. His cheeks expand around his open mouth and his wide eyes betray the force with which he blows. When the breath is gone, Ted begins to inhale and exhale with strong, sharp breaths, in through his nose and out through his mouth, that move his shoulders up and down as his chest inflates and deflates rapidly. While he does this, his arms hang limp from his shoulders and bounce and his limp forearms and hands flail close to his thighs. His legs bend and go rigid, bend and go rigid. The exhalation forces the air through his loose lips and creates a loud, blunt rubber sound, like the

snort of a horse. He snorts and nettles over and over with every breath. His torso and limbs are moving violently in a repetitive manner set the soundtrack of his increasingly loud snorting and the audience can see the tiny silver specks of saliva spraying up into his reddened face as he continues this breathing, alone in the spotlight, for a full minute.

The music stops. The spotlight remains on him. He stops breathing and is silent. At this moment, he resumes his initial position, face upwards and arms extended out, like a crucifixion. After he is back in his original position, the spotlight cuts out and the space is dark and silent. Ted exits the stage. A slow gurgling rumble echoes through the black box and out into the audience. The musical score, like a jet engine. When the lights face up again, the space is empty for twenty counts. From upstage left, Aaron and Lena step slowly onto the stage and into the audience's view, facing each other. As though waltzing, Lena steps backwards heading diagonally to center stage slowly. Aaron fills her every back step with his forward step and keeps his face close to hers, as they move in unison, staring into each other's eyes, their faces inches apart. Lena has her downstage hand's thumb on Aaron's lips and Aaron has his upstage hand's thumb on hers. Over thirty counts, Lena and Aaron walk backwards and forwards, respectively, never moving anything but their feet, and arrive in the middle of the space. They stop and stand facing the other, Lena facing stage left and Aaron facing stage right, feet shoulder width apart and arms at their sides. The light is a thin drape of white that falls from the ceiling and keeps them visible but slightly shaded in darkness.

Lena drops her right hand from Aaron's lips and moves her hand down his left arm, finding his waist. She holds her hand on his waist. Aaron then traces the tip of his thumb up the profile of Lena's face, over her nose and forehead, over the top of her head, around the upstage side of her hair bun and down the back of her head. When he reaches the nape of her neck, he grabs her neck with his whole hand, the nape in his palm. This is her cue to fall backwards, dropping her legs in between his and letting all of her weight fall into his forearm. He places her head on the stage, her face staring up at his from the floor, and swings his upstage leg over her body. He turns on his heel until he standing straight up, facing stage right. His feet are nearly touching hers and the two form a right-angled corner with their bodies. Aaron lifts his arms until they are parallel to the ground, and looks upwards, towards the ceiling. The audience sees his nose pointing directly to the sky, the highest point on his body. After a five count, Aaron drops his arms and his face and begins the ritual.

For the next thirty counts, the two trade breaths, one for one, back and forth. Aaron takes deep, loud breaths in, and when he can't take in any more, immediately leaks the breath out silently collapsing his chest almost unnoticeably. At the same cue, Lena takes in a long, silent breath through her



nose, filling her chest gently and unnoticeably until she releases, blowing out violently and audibly and spitting saliva upwards. The effect is one of a single breath moving through the two of them, blowing in from the stage right and out towards the ceiling. The audience's side view of his chest violently expanding and her chest violently deflating a second later is one blacksmith's bellows split into two parts. After the thirty counts, Aaron lifts his arms and stares north once more, his nose the highest point on his body. When he reaches this position, this is Lena's cue to start moving. Lena begins to creep upwards, pulling her shoulders up through her abs and using her arms to lift her torso off of the floor. In this same motion, her arms pull her still-rigid legs towards downstage. She slides her legs under her, holding her knees to her chest with her forearms. She sits looking out into the audience, with an emptiness in her eyes and a gentleness in her mouth.

Lena begins a one-minute floor phrase, with Aaron standing in the same spot perfectly still, looking out towards stage right. A light, airy, melodic tinkling of metal fills the space, loud but light. The lights flutter and resume the white sheer covering, though more intense this time, and Lena and Aaron are perfectly visible. For the entire phrase her legs move only with her torso, as though they are lame. She turns over onto her stomach and then onto her back one more. She arches her neck so it is off of the floor, only to relax and let her head crash back down. Her arms and hands sweep the floor, forming lines with her body that point stage right and stage left, upstage and downstage. She snakes and worms on her back along the ground, like a dog covering itself with the smell of a dead animal. With rigid arms that form ninety-degree angles, Lena creates a cage around her torso, wall by wall on the floor. After the minute, her legs reanimate and begin spinning and kicking. During this kicking, her torso and arms remain mostly still, only shifting when a kick is violent enough to move the rest of her. Lena's legs kick towards her head and they jump out, dragging her along the floor inches at a time. Her flailing legs are seemingly trying to get Aaron's attention, while he remains silent staring out towards stage right.

Her legs fall as though tired of trying. When they fall they make loud thumping sounds on the marley. When they touch the ground for the last time and he hears that they are now silent, Aaron does a heel turn, pauses for a second and does an arabesque, toe rising stage right, and bows to meet her resting feet. Holding the arabesque he brings her downstage foot to his face and puts the bottom of her foot near the arch to his upstage cheek. Lena, still lying, raises her arms over her body and behind her head, palms toward the ground. She pushes up with her hands, using her foot against Aaron's face as leverage, pushes up and lifts her body off of the stage, as Aaron, with her foot still on his face, moves towards her until she is perfectly perpendicular to the floor, like a post, his hands now supporting her ankles. A handstand. Dropping both of his hands to his side, Aaron runs off upstage left, and the pillar Lena has become starts to lean gently.

Slowly and gracefully, she lets her legs tilt and topple and crash to the ground without a sound, which cues the wing lights to vanish in the space. The white drape above is the only thing lighting the stage. Lena picks herself up slowly with her arms, spins until standing and quickly exits stage left.

The stage is empty for a count of thirty. The lights are dark, though a single spot remains on downstage center. Aaron enters downstage left. He walks slowly, foot in front of foot, for a count of 24 until he reaches. His downstage legs beg at the knee, his upstage leg lifts lightly off of the marley and he crouches down, his downstage legs dropping him slowly. His back stays straight and he remains staring into the stage right wing. When he is kneeling on the floor, he lets his hips fall so his bottom is touching his heels. Placing his hands on either side of him, he pushes his body straight up off the marley and lets his bent knees outstretch, kicking his legs out in front of him. He lets his arms rest and return his body to stage, where he sits, legs out, facing stage left. He lies back on his back and stares up and ceiling. This position he holds for ten counts. Then, as the wing lights begin to fade up and the spot light cuts out, Aaron begins to roll upstage slowly. He rolls to his right and he forces his torso up onto his right shoulder with force. One he is halfway rolled, and his back faces the audience, he lets himself fall onto his stomach, lifting his face slightly so as not to roll through his nose. His fall onto this stomach is gentle and stomach muscles make the fall into a roll and stop him from teetering. On his stomach he begins to lift his right shoulder now, using his toes to discreetly balance himself as he lifts. When the weight of his torso is now entirely on his left shoulder and he faces out towards the audience, he drops onto his back, facing the ceiling.

He repeats this exact action until his at the upstage edge. When he finished, Aaron is on his stomach. He slowly brings his hands up from alongside his thighs up to his shoulders. He places his palms down on the marley and pushes up. He picks his stomach off the stage and pushes back into a kneeling position. He again puts his hands on the stage and pulls his knees in towards his body, pulling his feet under him and standing in a crouch. He stands facing stage left. He walks slowly, foot after foot. Aaron exits stage left.

Ted returns, as does the loud rumbling. He takes a seat downstage left, one leg tucked underneath him and the other extended forward, and stares out at the audience. Aaron and Eleanor sit upstage center and downstage right respectively. The three sit quietly as the music swells into a loud tinkling, rattling. Lena comes on from stage left, walking foot after foot, staring stage right. She walks slowly, taking twenty counts to reach the middle. When she reaches the middle, she does an aerial, or a handless cartwheel, two chaines spins and continues to walk slowly off stage right. The other three remain still for this entire one-minute phrase. Lena returns upstage right and walks slowly, foot after foot, to Aaron. She crouches behind him so as to disappear. Her hand is the only

thing visible behind his broad body and it creeps up and over his shoulder and traces up his neck. She touches her thumb to his lips and, on with a small ballet hop, jumps back. As though animated by a switch, Aaron stands and begins to do fouettes en tournant, ballet turns on one foot while the other leg spins, while pointing out and then down out and then down.

She walks quickly along an invisible path to Ted and repeats the same action, crouching behind him and touching his lips with her thumb. She jumps back and watches him as he stands to do his fouettes en tournant in place. He spins like Aaron, his leg spinning with his body and pointing out and down, out and down.

With the two of them spinning, she walks quickly over to Eleanor and activates her the same way, thumb to lips. She pauses for twenty counts as they all spin together, all of them now on the same count and spinning in unison. Lena the activator then runs full speed towards Aaron who is spinning upstage center. She slides feet-first into his one grounded foot, feigning contact. He pretends to lose balance and fall a chaotic fall until he is splayed out on the ground, still moving in place with no discernable pattern, twitching really. She repeats this slide twice more, first to Ted and then to Eleanor. The three now lay twitching gently on the ground in place. Lena does a short series of jumps from her position stage right, piking at the top like a fish. Lena exits stage right. The music begins again as the three stop their twitching and lay staring at the ceiling. The white drape disappears and the wing lights are the only lights lighting the stage.

The music is a rattling hum, like the sound of an air conditioner, loud but constant. Aaron and Eleanor use their arms to pull their torso off the ground and their lame legs in towards their bodies. They stand up, briefly pose in Spanish forth position, like trees, and exit stage left and stage right, respectively.

Ted stops, stands up simply, stares into the audience and walks decisively towards stage center. The rattling hum swells loud now, almost uncomfortably loud. After a five count of motionlessness, Ted raises his arms as before and points his face towards the ceiling. When the arms and face drop this time, the breathing is violently forceful. He closes his eyes and lets his arms go slack. They bounce and shake by his side this time almost possessed. His snorting is harmonizing with the rattling hum and the whole space is consumed in spitting sound. He is spitting, more than before. Spitting and snorting with his eyes closed and his arms bouncing next to him. His chest heaves up and down and his knees bend and bounce up and down. Ted's whole body is heaving now and his snorts have become yelps. The music cuts out after a minute of this, and he is silent. Ted exits stage left. There is total darkness in the space.

When the wing lights rise and again the white drape of light shimmers down from the ceiling, Eleanor is standing all the way upstage, her back almost touching the back curtain. The wing lights cut out. A series of new lights which live all the way upstage shine down onto the back curtain from above, lighting her from behind. All that can be seen is the silhouette of her body as she begins to shift her weight from one foot to the other, her hands by her side. She sways back and forth gently for thirty counts, starting with quick shifts from foot to foot. The shifts become slower as her moving weight carries her farther to each wing with every transfer. Now, thirty counts into this motion, she is almost tipping over, her legs remaining rigid, each one taking the place of the other with each switch. Eleanor continues this extreme motion for thirty counts. The theater is quiet and all the audience can see is the outline of a body tipping from one foot to another like a metronome. She begins to shift feet faster, the motion is dying now, and in thirty counts she has returned to stillness.

The lights from the wings return and her face is revealed to the audience. A new sound now, a rushing like the static of a television is playing loudly in the theater. Eleanor waits for the sound to swell and grow louder. On her cue, she throws her hands behind her and holds them there, clenching them tightly right above the small of her back. Her legs stay straight but the weight of her torso falls slightly forward and her head is now staring diagonally downwards, like she is looking for something lost on the marley. She turns her body stage right, so the audience sees the pike in her stance. She starts pacing with no particular rhythm back and forth along the upstage line, back and forth from wing to wing. This back and forth, wing to wing motion lasts for forty five counts, on cue with the music. When the music swells even louder, there is a hidden cue, and she begins to break the pattern. At times seemingly random, she decides to break her stride and turn back the other way, then decides to break that line and go back towards stage left. The time between these shifts get shorter and shorter, making it seem as though she's moving faster, like ducks in a shooting gallery, though she is simply moving at the same speed along a shorter path and making sharp, turns along her axis. When the music grows to be almost insufferably loud, and she hears the other hidden cue, Eleanor is standing in the same spot, turning back and forth to each wing, stage right and stage left, back and forth, quickly. The music drops out and she stops.

The lights darken once more and once again, Eleanor is in shadow. With the curtain behind her lit, even her breathing, which is heavy now, can be seen as slight, wavy movements at the edges of her shadow.

This is the last phrase of her solo. The only truly melodic piece of music in the entire dance begins. It is a gentle piano concerto, in minor. The audience lets out a collective breath at the sound of the graceful notes. Eleanor feels their ease and begins to dance on a cue she has been instructed to pick at random and uniquely

every time she dances this section. She finds the cue in a simple chord, a rare major one, shortly after she feels the audience has given in to the piano. The lights come on her, making her reappear. She remains still, standing naturally, facing the audience. Go.

She lifts her right hand up slowly with the music, like a conductor bringing in nearly silent strings. She touches her lips with the thumb of her right hand. Her knees buckle and she falls slowly straight down but her knees flex in and go rigid again at the dangerous moment right before the back of her thighs touch her calves. She shoots up, her heels just leaving the floor for a millisecond. She bounces down and is calm again. Her arms drop to her sides. She lifts her left hand up slowly with the music and touches the thumb of her left hand to her lips. Again her body falls, and again she bounces up before falling too far. She is still again. The music continues to play gently. She lifts her left leg out in front of her, perfectly rigid, her toe pointing into the audience. When her leg is level with her waist, her knee begins to fold up and into her chest, her heel falling to her thigh. She brings her knee as close to her face as possible. Eleanor waits for a count of five, kisses her knee and immediately drops down, only her grounded left leg to support her fall. Her right knee stays pressed to her chest. She falls and at the moment of danger, again, pushes her weight upwards, her body bending in a wave upwards, like the neck of a swan. The audience begins to vibrate with movement and whispers. Upright she drops her right leg and stands still facing downstage. Delicately her left toe pops up and begins to point into the audience, her leg extending rigidly out in front of her. When again her leg is level with her waist, her knee bends upwards heading towards her chest. When her heel again is near meeting the top of her thigh, she lowers her head to kiss her knee. Again she falls upon the kiss, and her left knee stays glued to her chest. Her body is plummeting downwards, the weight of her torso falling fast, but again before the danger, she thrusts the force of her right leg into the ground, sending her body upwards in a wave, like the arch of a harp. When she lands with a small bounce, after her heel has left and returned to the ground, the audience lets out one helpless clap from house left and one shrill "Ah," from house right. She does three more chaines spins and exits stage right.

The lights swell up again and the four dancers are standing at the four corners of the stage. Ted is downstage left, Aaron is upstage left, Eleanor is upstage right, Lena is downstage right. The four fall to their knees simultaneously and begin to crawl towards the dancer opposite, meeting at center stage after 25 counts. Their heads touch and the position is held. Aaron and Eleanor rise to their knees and immediately fall into one another's arms. They collapse into a ball on the ground. Ted and Lena repeat the action, rising and falling into each other, collapsing into a ball and holding the position.

Both pairs begin a seemingly unpatterned floor phrase, with each dancer moving into and under the legs and arms of the other, as though the ball on the ground was melding and morphing into itself, ouroboros. The dancers keep their torsos touching for most of the phrase. Legs and arms flail out for moments, only to be sucked back into the cluster. This phrase continues for a minute, with the intensity of the morphing increasing with another swell in the original throbbing score. Suddenly, the pairs break and rise back their knees, still staring at one another. The score cuts out. Silence. Under two spot lights the pairs begin to raise their downstage hands to touch, palm to palm, like a mirror. They hold this position for a full minute, as the spots cut out and an almost strobe-like effect of on off on off is put on the white lights coming from the wings. The music returns, louder than before and this time with a simple yet strong bass drum beat behind the rumbling. The dancers stay perfectly still while a second flurry of white lights flicker on and off from the ceiling, making two foot squares of light on the stage that appear and disappear as the dancers remain still, touching hands. The sparkling stage and throbbing beat hold the dancers in a cocoon of light and sound but they remain motionless. Their stillness betrays their heaving chests, each one breathing in and out and visibly different moments. The effects of the dance. The music and lights fill the space, signaling the end is near.

At once, everything is silent and still. In the darkness, the dancers exit to the stage opposite their initial positions for this phrase, crossing each other's path as they walk. A small, quiet rattling begins to echo out into the theater. Lena enters stage right and walks, foot after foot, staring straight ahead, and exits stage left. The stage and house go dark. The tinkling is done. The dance is finished.

The four enter in a casual walk, relief in their shoulders and the crowd begins clapping and shouting. The four, with smiling faces, join hands, face the audience and bow. Bravo.

## Chapter 17

When he woke up, the bedroom was strange to his eyes. He smelled gunpowder for a split-second, the sharp yet instantly vanishing scent you smell when you smack the back of your head on the ground. His eyes burned. He woke facing the door onto the balcony and his shirt, pants and socks were still on. The sky was dark. Vicente woke up most mornings at around 5:30am to pee before going back to bed. He had just starting taking a pill for his swollen prostate, which actually made the organ swell bigger initially, before shrinking it back to normal. This meant a lot of little trips for a couple of little drops each time, though it no longer pained him to go. So waking up in the dark was becoming routine. The rumor of light coming off of the Atlantic at 5:30am always excited him. Something about being present at the very beginning of a day that grew older and changed drastically always made him feel wise. He couldn't see any of that light now. The

sky was growing darker. The streetlights that lined the boardwalk were throwing amber pathways onto the wood and the ocean looked starless and black. In the lights of the boardwalk he could see a shining of thin raindrops. It was pouring. He felt for a corner of the bed to ground himself. His blue striped button-down was soaked in sweat. He decided to sit up on his knees and take it off before doing a single thing more. He could see the blur of the white nightstand as his eyes adjusted to the light. He leaned over, falling on his belly, and gently ran his hand over the top, so as not to knock over any of the water glasses onto the floor. He remembered one detail from the day: he had certainly made his way under the bedspread before falling asleep. He did sleep, he thought, he knew he must have. The bedspread was in a heap on the ground. He imagined himself getting hot and, with his eyes still closed, tossing the whole spread onto the floor.

When Jose was young he had night terrors. On nights when Irma was away, Vicente remembered picking him up from the bed and moving the sweaty hair from his forehead while Jose breathed heavily in and out. The first time it happened, Jose was so traumatized that he couldn't talk and Vicente took him to the hospital. He remembered being terrified. Now Vicente was soaked in sweat. The door must have woken him, he thought, and for a moment he longed to be comforted by his wife, who did it so well, whom he could hear moving around in the living room.

His glasses weren't on the nightstand. His glasses were always on the nightstand. The room was becoming familiar again, becoming bright and his eyes less blurry. He found the baseboard with his hands and started throwing pillows off the bed, one by one, like when his wife emptied her entire purse sometimes simply to find her car keys. Gotcha. He fingered the lens to make sure they weren't broken. He put them on.

Irma was home but she still hadn't yelled for him. He coughed to let her know he was there and made a quick attempt to fix the bed, managing only to toss one pillow back to its spot near the headboard and clumping the covers of the edge of the bed. The silence was more than he could bear. He jumped out of bed and over to the dresser and pulled out an old construction company giveaway t-shirt. Before he opened the door to the living room, he remembered. Shit. The sliding glass door.

When he walked into the living room, Irma was bending over to lay another blue fish beach towel on a large pool of water floating on the marble. She hadn't even dropped her purse yet. She laid it down over the spot and the water began to darken the stylized blue water lines of the towel. She dropped her purse on a chair, finally and reached down again to gather the original towel, which was soaked through, to put it in the washer. Vicente opened the door and walked

into the living room, pausing a few feet from the doorway. His hair was funny, something in his eyes too, a daze, like he was returning from a fight. Irma didn't say a word. Vicente didn't either. She walked over to him slowly, with a furrowed brow. He stood still. When she touched her palms to his creased cheeks he spoke.

"I'm sorry about the door. I went out to go out and then the phone rang so I came back inside quickly and left it open. It was the wrong number and I went into the room to watch television and I got so tired so I fell asleep."

Irma let him keep talking. She was looking for something.

"Irma, please. I know what you're thinking but anyone could have done that. You've left the door open too before. The phone rang and I couldn't hear it right away so I ran to get it because I thought it might be Manny calling but it was a wrong number. Irma, I mean it. I'm fine."

She dropped her hands from her face and her eyes from his stare. She took his hand and made him sit down on the sofa. Without a word, she walked over to the kitchen and poured him a glass of water from the door of the refrigerator. She brought it back to him. Then she went over to the puddle and picked up the soaking wet towel carefully, holding the clump away from her body.

"Irma please..."

And with this she fired him an angry look that stopped him dead. She continued on to the bathroom, rang out the towel in the tub and dropped it into the washing machine. Vicente sat still, every minute or so taking a sip of water, while Irma went back and forth with the beach towels, laying them down, mopping the spot and carrying them back into the bathroom. When the spot was good and dry, and she had moved the coffee table back to its place, she dragged a chair over to the balcony door, stood on it carefully and brought down the curtain rod. The curtains had to be washed. When he saw her stepping on the seat, he again jumped up to help, only to think better of it and sit back down, sipping his water. He tried to remember what really happened. Was he lying about the phone call? He remembered being in the living room and then becoming very tired. Why did he open the door? And when? When was he out there?

He could hear the washing machine turn on, the loud whirring made this place seem more hospitable, like the dream was wearing off, the light filtering in and the room becoming familiar again. When Irma brought him two Ibuprofen, he realized he had a headache. Sometimes his blurriness in his eyes gave him a thumping headache that started in his temples only to move backwards. It was now so commonplace that he had to ask himself if he did, in fact, have a headache. He swallowed the pills down with the last bit of water. Irma still had not said one single word to him since entering the apartment. She flopped down in the corner of the couch and leaned her head against her palm for support. She



looked over at him with a sad smile on her face, waiting for him to explain. He raised his back off of the back of the couch and looked down towards the marble. "I'm ok, Irma. I made a mistake. I went out to check the clouds and forgot to close the door on the way back in. I'm sorry."

He looked up expecting see that face, the Catholic disbelief and disapproval face his mother had. Instead her eyes were shut tight and her chest and her shoulders were bouncing up and down rapidly. She was crying.

"Queriiiiidaaa..." but he stopped himself from lifting his hand to her face like he usually did. He stopped because he didn't know what she felt. Was she angry at him, so frustrated she couldn't take it?

Tears were now streaming down her face and onto her chest, which was rising and falling like he had never seen. But she remained nearly still like a dark storm cloud before the rain. The tiny sharp sounds of gasps were the only thing he heard. This was a child crying, not a grown woman. What could it be?

"I promise, I'm fine..."

And with this she broke. Her head fell into her hands and she let out a long, shrill sound like a whining dog desperately trying to get out of its cage. The gasps were gone but the tears seemed to double in density and he could see the salt water falling between her fingers into her lap. He sat there paralyzed, confused. A thought. He stood up and walked to the kitchen with his glass. He filled it up and brought it back to her. He put his hand on her shoulder to let her know he had something for her, as she hadn't picked her head up out of her hands and the tears were still streaming down the sides of her hands and through her fingers.

He stood up again, not knowing what else to do. He walked to the kitchen. Once he was away, she rose from the couch quickly and went into their bedroom, shutting the door gently behind her. He was alone. He walked to the refrigerator and opened it up, looking for a snack, a piece of wheat bread. Instead he saw a full carton of eggs. When the kids were teenagers, and she felt like they needed a break, Irma would make the kids breakfast at dinnertime, and they could wear pajamas and watch tv from the dinner table. He hated it. Mostly, though, it just felt like his job to hate it. He knew they all did it mostly when he wasn't around, and when he was, Irma always asked him if it was ok, though she never waited for his answer.

The first thing to do is stage your materials, he thought. He brought out the cutting board and cleared the counter of anything not needed. He needed a bowl, a sharp knife, the wisk and the paper towels. From out of the fridge came the carton of eggs, a carton of 2% milk, and three thin translucent plastic bags, onions, peppers and tomatoes. Then the orange juice. He also brought out two bagels from the freezer, from a bag he bought at Roasters and Toasters the week before. Once the materials were staged, the process was easy. Nothing fancy, just what needed to be done. Sautee the veggies together with olive oil, salt and

pepper. Then pour in the whisked eggs and milk, turn the heat a bit lower and always remember to flip the clumps of egg as they form before they have a chance to burn. The bagels get microwaved for 10 seconds each before they are split, as they are frozen and need to thaw quickly. If they are left in the microwave too long, the water gets absorbed by the bagels, making them chewy, even when toasted, which is bad. After toasting, each half of each bagel gets a thin but fully-coating cover of cream cheese and a tomato slice. The bagels sit next to the eggs on the plate.

He poured the orange juice into two tall glasses and turned on the tv. When the meal was laid out on the table, which floated between the kitchen and the living room, he knocked gently on the door to their bedroom, whispering her name, and letting himself in. When he walked in, Irma was sitting on the bed, which she had remade completely, as she did every morning. He smiled at her. "Dinner is ready."

## Chapter 18

Daniel opened the door to the apartment and ran in quickly, without inviting JP inside.

Gimme one sec.

He went into through the living room into his bedroom, where he opened a Cuban cigar box his father had given him back in Jersey. The box was filled with plastic black film canisters with grey tops. This was his stash. He grabbed an eighth and walked back through the living room, where JP stood, having already let himself inside. He stood silently, his mouth slightly ajar.

Dude.

All French men love video games.

Dude, man, this is amazing.

All French men love video games.

Yea, it's pretty cool, I guess.

So...what first?

It took a bit of convincing. JP gave him the same stuff he gave the clients. A calm, reassurance that the secret of this place would stay with him. That they would only ever play after work, and that Daniel was free to say no anytime he wanted. There was no work talk at Daniel's and no perfumer/chemist bullshit hierarchy. JP was a bad loser, but all that meant was that he wanted to play more, to get better. Daniel won everything all of the time, but he was trained at being a good winner, as all true gamer nerds are when playing amateurs. Daniel didn't baby JP through the controls, and JP never said anything mean to Daniel about his lifestyle, other than "fuck you, you piece of shit," which Daniel liked. By the third visit, JP had his own chair.

Maybe twice a week, for about three weeks, the two had a perfect system going. If JP didn't have a meeting, or a party to attend at some cool Miami hotel, and Daniel wasn't making up the work he needed to do late, JP would send down an email with p.s. tonight? attached.

Daniel would load his bong while JP resumed their game of God of War or Assassins Creed. They would smoke and order Pizza Hut, which they had in France, and spend three or four hours beating the role-playing games. A lifetime spent in Europe meant JP was not terrible at FIFA soccer and the games were more competitive, which was fun for Daniel, but both secretly yearned to kill a hooker with a knife, or climb the festering limbs of a Greek god. For three weeks, they stuck to this routine, JP never slept over and they never snuck out during work, though both probably could. That was until Portal 2.

On a Wednesday in that third week, JP sent down an email to Daniel asking him to set him up with a row of raw molecules for Egyptian jasmine, magnolia and grapefruit. He wrote thanks, which he never did, and the longest p.s. to date.

Thanks,

J

P.S. Man, I can't get this fucking game out of my head. Today, I wanted to shoot a portal under Christiana's desk and one over the trash bin outside. We need to play now. At lunch, yea?

Daniel saw the problem. There was nothing complicit about hanging out after work, but sneaking out at lunch...still he couldn't stop thinking about Portal 2 either. They went.

Portal 2, a masterful, beautiful puzzle game, is essentially two robots trying to get from point A to point B with the beginning and end of a moveable wormhole as their only tool. When played with two players, is not a competition, it is a team exercise. In order to win, both players need to figure out the trick of the level and execute it. At the beginning, Daniel explained, and JP tried blindly to follow his advice. Two or three hours in though, he began to get it.

Ah bon? Ba...ok. If I shoot my portals there and there, you have to go through, and then shoot yours there right away, tu vois? You see? Daniel had seen from the beginning of the level, but dutifully played ignorant when he felt JP was ready to lead.

Daniel never liked Jean-Phillipe as much as when they played Portal 2 together. He wouldn't play unless JP was there, and when JP was ready, they would beat the two-player and take turns beating the one-player game. When he was ready.

When he felt comfortable, JP would say things like "You get the cute robot, cuz youre cute." And Daniel would get quiet. He would say things like "I bet Kratos has a big dick, yea?" And Daniel would laugh hard, because he was high, and because he wondered about that kind of thing all the time, though it was different with his LA friends. "I bet Mileena gives killer head."

Daniel was a geeky gamer, and geeky gamers can always keep playing, but when JP finally gave in at the end of their sessions, "ba ok, enough, uh?" Daniel would pretend to be done as well, and chuck the controller onto the couch. In the beginning that meant a fist bump from JP and he was gone, but lately JP hung around a bit before leaving, walking around the dark room, looking through the records, occasionally asking about one and wanting to play it on the record player. Initially it was too dark in the room to see anything but the blinking lights of the systems, but now that his eyes had adjusted, JP could see that Daniel was actually incredibly well read, with a strong passion for American history, Russian literature and the kind of science fiction that made great movies, not just great games. In JP's world, a smart person announced his intelligence the way a rich person rolled up to the office in a Bentley coupe and the way a hot guy fucked everyone and never gave a shit what anyone thought. Daniel never said anything to anyone. That was sexy.

## Chapter 19

"I'm in love with you."

She laughed, her naked back arching gently off of the white sheet. She laughed with her whole body.

"I'm serious."

"Shut the fuck up."

"Ok," he said quickly and subserviently, like a child. He smiled at her, smirked really, with a confidence she found a little too familiar. He fell onto his back once more. He didn't know why but when he was lying in bed with someone, on his back, he was always at his funniest. He could hear himself saying things while staring at the ceiling in a soft, hoarse voice. Making jokes, poking fun or saying sappy, romantic things that made the girls laugh. He was painting again. This is when they fall, he thought.

He sat up again, this time running his hand under the covers, along her naked waist.

"I can't wait to meet your kids," he said, staring at the ceiling, almost to himself. He was smiling at the point of laughing.

"They're going to fuckin love me. The hot young art guy their mom is banging."

She chuckled and punched him in his ribs. He let out an overly dramatic groan, like a cartoon.

"They'll say Mick, when did you fall in love with our mom?"

"They would never ask you that."

"And I'll say well, kids, I saw your mom staring out into the Atlantic one night, on the deck of a very fancy beach club. She was just standing, almost waiting for hurricane Irene to come. The wind was blowing her hair back...and her pussy was hanging out of her dress."

She exploded at this, back off the bed, breasts in the air, her mouth open and her eyes closed, laughing. He thought at that moment that if he left this house, and forgot how he felt about her, he could remember this laugh at the very least. It was so loud. If he could get her to laugh like that, he wouldn't ever worry about losing her interest. He could, he thought confidently, always make her laugh like that. At least he'd have that laugh as a reference point when the doubts finally rolled in. He buried his head in her neck and kissed.

"That's when I knew."

She giggled with the long breaths calming her down from her laugh. At the end of her laugh, though, for some unexplainable reason, every thought in the world rushed into her head. It was worse that he was funny, was charming. Charming is nothing, charming is boys, charming is Gray, charming is pain. What happened to the awkward guy who couldn't make a move last night. Now he's charming. Jesus.

"Alright, I'm going shower, then I'm going to get some sleep, finally. And that means, you should probably head out."

"I'm gonna go check on the skylight."

He jumped out of bed and pulled his boxers on. Once during the night, he sat up like this on the edge of the bed before going to get them water from the kitchen. She reached for his shoulders from behind and pulled him back to her. He waited this time an extra second but she sat on the other edge, reaching down for her underwear. He was mad she didn't kiss him before walking to the shower and he was mad she didn't walk to the shower naked. He was being kicked out. He walked through the kitchen and out into the living room to check on the skylight. The garbage bags held up, they didn't seem ripped. Good job fixing it, Mick, he thought. You really came to the rescue. There was, though, still a bit of water on the ground, not much, but enough to need a mopping. Looking over his shoulder, he dipped his toe into the puddle and began to spread the water out with his foot, hoping it would dry on its own. He left the scene, walked back into the bedroom and stood next to the bed.

In the bathroom she made sure to take her time. She hoped he was angry and insulted and he'd leave. It'd make things easier if he was pissed off. That way he didn't have to feel bad for calling her late, fucking her and then leaving when they were done. He was sensitive and if she could give him that, she'd feel good about herself. Her nipples were sore, he was biting them a lot. What a little boy. She thought she could hear him rustling about in the bed room, getting his

clothes on, shutting the front door loudly, getting into his piece of shit car and leaving. Then he'd tell his friends about how he fucked the married chick they saw him with at the beach house.

The girls he normally dated wore lots of rings. One gold ring that belonged her grandmother, and a couple of meaningless silver and colorful things on any assortment of fingers. They wore straps of woven leather around their wrists and six or seven necklaces each, all having something to do with guns or birds or American Indians. They looked cool, like guys almost, and very young. She didn't have any of that. On her dresser was a thick white gold watch, a man's watch, with a brushed metal chain, simple and sharp and sleek, yet heavy like a Wall Street banker's. She wore a thick Cartier white gold bracelet with tiny diamonds studding each link and a plain Cartier white gold ring she wore on the ring finger of her right hand. There was more in here, he knew it, diamonds and pearls, but when he saw her on the balcony, and when she greeted him at the door, this was all she wore. That's not true. She wore a simple pendant necklace of something he'd by now forgotten, but he didn't see it anywhere. Only what was on the dresser.

All of her jewelry seemed to weigh down her thin hands and her thin arms, like she was dressing up in her dad's clothes. How did that watch not break her wrist? He was not new to the combination of beautiful, expensive, shiny silver things on dark, tanned skin before. It made him think of the women in Orange County, where he grew up. What obviously twisted shallow people, he thought every day until he left California. And she was kicking him out. This woman? The kind of woman who wears see-through tops to pick up her kids from nursery school? The kind of woman who sees more cardio specialists during the day than an Olympic athlete? Who hires interior decorators or is, in fact, an interior decorator? That kind of woman? She was those women. Wasn't she? He walked into the bathroom, not knocking. She didn't hear him come in.

"Hey."

"Hey, what are you doing in here?"

She figured he'd shout back but she didn't hear anything. She turned the water off. The door opened and he came in, naked.

"I really don't want to go. I want to stay here."

He wasn't trying to be romantic. This wasn't a romantic gesture. This was a mandate, well, his version. This is what he wanted and he was expressing it simply, but with force. He wanted to say more but he held off for a second.

"Alright, but we have to sleep. I need to sleep, I mean it."

"Good," he said, keeping with the sternness, and he kissed her once, pulled back, grabbed her waist and went in again. She flinched.

"I'll be done in a minute, and then you can shower if you want."

He stepped out onto the marble floor, cold and naked.

When she walked out of the bathroom, still drying off, he had refilled their shared water glass and was waiting for her in bed, sitting up against the headboard, his legs under the duvet. First, she dropped her towel as she searched for clothes, underwear, boy's gym shorts and a t-shirt. He watched her every move in silence. Then, she set the alarm on her phone and slid under the covers. Finally, she turned away from him and curled up into a ball. He waited to see what she would do. Then, a little disappointed, he reached over her and kissed her neck sweetly, and dropped onto his back. She smiled a bit when he sighed. "Good morning," she said. He smiled. "Good morning." She fell asleep first, and he followed.

## Chapter 20

In the latest hurricane news, Irene came and went without much fanfare. There was rain, but very little wind meaning that damages sustained were mainly minor flooding in coastal areas, with no extensive property damage reported. Experts at the NHC say that for reasons beyond their understanding, Irene seemed to dissolve miles from the coast of Miami Beach. According to the reports, Irene was nearing a category 4 before, for no apparent reason, died down to a tropical storm. The rain spat down from as early as 9pm but it was followed by extremely tame winds, almost as though the storm had used up all of its energy in the buildup to a certainly major natural disaster. Police and firefighters continue to stand by for emergencies but the worst is past us and there are no injuries to report. The NHC has issued a statement explaining the storm that to most was "a lot of fuss over nothing."

We here at the NHC are relieved that our noble attempts at talking the storm down have proven invaluable. There will be, in light of the precautionary exaggerations made by this bureau, some backlash concerning the necessity of such an institution. We can assure you that our convictions as to the severity of this storm were made in complete earnestness and we remind the residents of Southern Florida that meteorology is not a science. Not even close. You couldn't begin to imagine how we spend our hours over here. To be honest the whole business is more like guessing, with very few real resources to educate those guesses. It did rain a lot though, which we totally called.

Irene has made fools of us, which has and will happen until we decide that trying to guess a hurricane's motions based solely on every motion she has made up to that moment is truly the stubbornness of a madman. The form of guessing we here at the NHC are guilty of is at best an accusation that no storm since the dawn of mankind has ever done the opposite of what we assumed it would. The actions of Irene may anger those forced to leave their homes and flee inland, but these same actions will vanish into the reaches of the land of lost memories, and come the next hurricane, we at the NHC will promise to tell you everything that

will happen with one hundred percent confidence. Chide us, rob us of our positions, but we promise you this: get rid of us guessers, and when the wind picks up again, you will find yourself selecting a new pot of guessers to stroke your temples, massage your shoulders and affirm that this new hurricane is certain to annihilate us all.

2:06 PM

**Samuel:** hihi hi

i have a book for you.

it's amazing to read

the thousand autumns of jacob de zoet.

it's perfume.

in a way

2:07 PM

**me:** oh by the guy who did cloud atlas  
mitchell

**Samuel:** yea

**me:** yea i want to read that

ill get it on my nook

**Samuel:** je recommend. i broke my kindle

**me:** #fwps

2:08 PM

**Samuel:** so is it amazing?

2:10 PM

**me:** what

miami

?

## Chapter 21

He was so perfectly adorable when he demanded to sleep over, she thought, in the moments before he woke to the sound of her waking. Why did he do it? A strange one, this one. Must have a mom thing. And with that, she picked herself off of the bed, sat on the edge and started to put her sweats back on. He gets food, at least, for that move. She looked back at him. Still unconscious. What a deep sleeper.

"Mick," she whispered. Nothing.

She wanted to get on top of him, or get under the sheets and wake him up by blowing him. Does he deserve that? No man really ever deserved that, but that was part of the fun. She took her shirt off. Almost on cue, his eyes opened with a hazy look that she didn't buy.

"Hey," he said with an overdone sleep in his throat.

Uh huh, she smirked and put her shirt back on.

"I'm going to order in some Thai food. What do you want?"



She saw it in his eyes, the wake-up blowjob only better. He really didn't deserve this, but that was part of the fun. Look at that stupid smile on his face. Yes, you can stay.

"Chicken pad thai and a thai iced tea."

She nodded and walked out of the room, down the hallway and into the kitchen. He fell back down and spilled over onto his side, putting a pillow between his legs. He let out a tiny satisfied groan. She opened the stainless steel door to the fridge and pulled out a small bottle of zepherhills spring water. She closed the door, twisted off the cap, took a small swig, turned to the kitchen island, put the water down, stood back and placed both of her hands on the marble counter.

The smile. Her eyes fixed on a single speck of white in the green black marble countertop. She looked down and though her head moved, her eyes stayed fixed on the marble in between her splayed fingers. The stare felt good, like a massage, like her eyeballs were soaking in a warm bathtub. The rest of her body felt a warm wave that began in her legs. As hard as it was, she broke the stare and simultaneously pushed herself off of the island, stepping backwards and leaning against the kitchen counter. Her hand jumped to her mouth. She was giggling now, her eyes squinting, making her cheeks fat under her fingers. She kept her hand pressed tightly against her mouth, as though trying to keep in the sound she wasn't yet making. Her shoulders began to bounce slightly. Her hand then slid down past her chin and she grabbed her neck, like he had, for a brief moment, the night before. She stopped laughing and breathed in, her eyes wide now, her mouth open.

What the fuck is happening? What a little girl. Fuck it, she thought, if he's gonna run out, he's gonna run out, but until he does, I'll let him follow me around the house. What would he like? A movie on the flat-screen? What could we do? When will he wake up? It'll be evening soon, maybe time to start drinking again. When the food comes, we'll sit at the table, she thought. She was in sweats, could he wear something of Grays? All he has with him is his clothes from the club. Would that be weird? Yes. Yes, it definitely would. He'd rather wear a big sweatshirt of mine, probably.

The rain was still coming down, she could hear it on the windows and on the garbage bags, which weren't working so well. There was water on the floor. She didn't move to wipe it up. This didn't feel much like a hurricane to her. The wind wasn't making noises. The cars will be fine, she thought. The guys will be fine. This storm won't last the whole weekend. The sun will shine through the windows and moment now, and the night will be calm. No reason to stay in really. Fuck.

Mick woke up a second time and looked over, but she wasn't there. Still, he could smell her perfume in the bed, or maybe it was her shampoo or a body

cream, something like lavender. He heard glasses in the kitchen. He wanted to fall back to sleep, to stay in the bed, like a teenager, but he got up and put his clothes on. There was a large orange hooded sweatshirt splayed out on the chair. This must be for me, he thought, and put it on without a shirt underneath. He walked into the kitchen. She turned to him and smiled, this time better, more of what he wanted, which scared him for a second.

"Good evening."

"Good evening." He smiled back.

"The food is on its way, it should be here in ten minutes or so."

"Great, I'm a little hungry."

She sensed a slight tone in his voice that wasn't in him in bed. Something sobering. She let it out.

"You still feeling like staying in all weekend, right?"

Jesus Christ, what the fuck? What the fuck was that? She couldn't get that one back. Disappointed in herself, she dropped her eyes from his.

Comfort her now, no matter what comes later, comfort her now, he thought.

Jesus, why did she say that? He grabbed her and kissed her forehead.

"Nervous I'll leave now that I've hit it?"

"No."

God damn, they both thought simultaneously, I'm glad that's over.

## Chapter 22

What am I doing here? Is this the turn, did I miss it? It's funny. When I was little they forecasted a tornado in Akron and the city shut stopped classes, shut down the roads and instructed us all into the basement for safety. We missed a basketball game because of it. I remember all of us, the whole school, huddled together, waiting in the basement. The tornado didn't hit us at all, I think it demolished a tractor like thirty miles away but that was it. When the danger was gone, they brought us all back up to our classrooms and we had to wait until our parents showed up to sign us out. I remember sitting in the cafeteria with all my classmates and the teachers. They were all looking at me, patting me on the back like they were sorry for me. People would come by and pat me on the back and say "sucks, man, I'm sorry." I couldn't play one game of basketball, like they thought that was it, like now I wasn't going to be seen by the scouts and my life would be ruined because of a tornado. It was stupid, but thinking about it now, I remember they looked genuinely sad. They were sad for me, sure, but mostly they were sad for themselves, like Akron's hero was in trouble and they would never see their down rise to the top, as it should. How sad.

Shit, was that it? No Key Biscayne next left, I'm good. Now look at me. Driving to my death. And what will they say now, when I die trying to save them?

Another poor performance. Another clutch moment thrown away. It's not that Miami didn't support me, it's not that they didn't welcome me, it's that they

didn't fight for me, stand up to the rest of the country and say "He's ours now. Fuck off." After Game 6 the fans flooded onto the streets, took a deep breath and forgot about it. They drove home in their Mercedes and forgot, and got on with their lives. And when the media storm rained down on my head, they sat home and watched it all go down on TV. This is it: Baggs State Park.

But look at me anyway. What should I do? Probably turn back around right now, instead of walking to the water. What a pathetic need that is: to need to show them who I am, that I'm their champion. It's what drives me. I admit, only to myself, here now, that my heart jumped when they came to me, when they drove up and got out and asked to be invited in. Of course I would help. Save Miami? Of course I would help.

Nothing left to do now but get ready. This is game 6, Jordan shit. Time to focus. Where are my headphones? No stars in the sky now. This is your moment Lebron, this is the time. What should I do? I'll tell you. Rip this motherfucking, cocksucking storm a new asshole, and when I drift back to shore, bloodied and broken with victory draped over my shoulders like seaweed, I'll invite the scared children out to the beach. They'll smell the salt in the air and the breeze in their eyes. He did it, they'll say. He saved us. The prophecy is true; the King has saved us. Lebron!

Camera time, feel them at my shoulder. Powder? Sand. Showtime.

### Chapter 23

Oh like a rumor drifting down from the white north her beak loaded with the gizzards of a dirty secret she places them before us they have found a champion they have found a champion they have found a champion well we wait for the shoreline to break in our midst and spy the soldier *tout seul* in the sand oh to see the red fire fear in his eyes him alone without a hope alone and quivering as his skin tightens with a cold front his skin wet with sweat from a furnace blast of hot pressure his toes and heels making bunkers in the sand so the earth will keep him from falling oh but the gods have always harbored a sweet passion for the broad-backed mortal champions the fickle women gods taking forms to lay with the victors for a single screaming night oh but look ladies come down from your spinning and plotting and spitting and behold the champion is a moor a moor a moor how broad his back and long his body his arms and chest are shaded with scrawls dark scratchings like the warrior tribes of other earth who dance and scream he dusts his hand with sand like the silent eastern tribes who uses the white powder to dry and calm their trembling hand and regain power over their human bodies he stands with the powder in palm and grins to the south west right in our eyes and look how he beckons us with dust sand thrown above his head a tornado of white dust he is confident il a beaucoup de fiere lui for he must

be a fool to taunt us so but oh how he does this moor alone on the beach like a child like the child we three spied as Troy burned to the ground and he watched the wasteland and when oh when after we extinguished the fires and sprayed salt in the sword gashes of slaughtered soldiers and pink water trickled down the temple walls an empire of sacrifices for the gods to gorge upon and the child a boy standing on the western wall as the storm passed over his head he stood there trembling yet resolute oh how we all wished to grab him in our arms and ferry him away, take him under the water drown him until the shaking went out of his shoulders and ferry him personally to Styx where his mother awaited his arrival the foolish moor the boy all grown and ready to meet his family under water he taunts and jokes now his jokes born from fear born from fear born from fear oh he blows into his hands one then the other preparing his dry hands for battle he carries no weapon no axe of Ajax not the curved sword of the sand people not the harpoon of the northerners maybe possibly he holds behind him the dagger of the coward the infidel the scorned lover oh now his head bounces as he blows into his palms and stares under his brows with that look and we feel our swirling heart jump for a moment look at him look at him look at him bearded like the snow warriors who feast on the frozen bones of winter game and wear over shoulders the great furs pilfered from their victims oh la la oh the little Trojan boy grown into a man now and jumping up and down to spread the blood through his veins preparing for battle how foolish a boy still a boy born on the new year yes we know him now the whispering white north has floated down rumor on rumor we digest his weaknesses he will stand and fight for this city no champion could save the tiny traps of land from twisting and bending and breaking under our spell under our spell under our spell yes he takes his first step to us as we approach the shore like a the man like the carpenter walking on water what a fine trick but we can trick as well we take him now let this be over quickly the man is waiting for us and we've no times for champions even beautiful ones with shoulders broad like walls and heels dug into dirt so yes let's dispatch him quickly oh he moves yes ladies grab him now lift him up rib his hulking arms off his body drop him and let the sand soak up the blood but oh quel surprise he digs his toes and charges first this is different this is different this is different oh how we'll entertain him this OH oh how that hurt his brawlic shoulder charging in he knocks with wind away and we gasp at that that pains us pains us pains us like drying out and dying down and floundering like a fish foundering on the mainland far from the coast he hits so hard with the shoulder he's an athlete this one so strong he's made us very angry very angry very angry rip him apart and we go he feels first the sting of the salt then he gasps for air as he drowns standing still from the fat drops of rain on his face and the wind picks him up as his toes dig into sand it cannot help he is raised now now he is twisting now he is screaming and drop he drops so hard we hear his wind leave his body the silly white band along his forehead gone oh his is so handsome now and brave look sisters look he dusts himself off quel con the beach is in him now he spits sand and claps his hands together lowers his body

and screams his war scream this is not his first time falling is it sisters he readies himself for another blow do not be so proud sisters as to fail to prepare this time we know the shoulder carries a force yet unfelt to our strong bodies so prepare prepare prep OH gods how he hits he hits like a champion with that shoulder and by the time we counter he is gone back on shore and keeps us spitting wind through our mouths near the coral he weakens us the moor does the boy who watched try burn and be doused is here to take his revenge on us we fear sisters that we went too far with the gored soldiers they deserve their funeral rights and we soaked their death rattles in choking water enough talk sisters rip him OH spit spit spit take him now lift him how he digs against us raise him up he is heavier now or our bones ache now this man this moor is taking our breath from us oh how he digs in to the ground to stick tightly to shore but we raise him little by little to drop him he feels less we fear his bones are breaking and he bleeds the pink sand soaks it up to saturation like the shores of Troy but he stands faster and dusts his hands and legs off he is breathing heavy now like a bull his beautiful eyes target us oh how we wish he would spare us another assault he is so like the boy but now it is we who weep and tremble and wish he would take us down under the water or farther out to sea drown us now drown us now dro OH he is on us now pounding down with powerful fists we relent we relent take us now and drown us bring us to Styx mes dieux bring us to Styx drown our bones we wish to see our families champion here our words let the king who hides behind your shoulders say he has won the day we no longer worry we are in love with you who brings us pain because you bring us closer to our home and the tiny traps of land who gasp their lasts breaths because of us deserve your vengeance.

## Chapter 24

Look to the Limpkin

Look to the Limpkin

The long-toed hobbler

A warbler only when sunlight shines on her

A robber in water of lizards and frogs

And mollusks of moon or apple be gobbled

A forager in short dead brush near the water

She warns once then plucks out the meager meat easy

With her toes and browner sharp beak like tweezers

And the mollusks turned husks are mollusks no more

Look to the Limpkin for signs of good weather

Don't frighten or wobble her warble much further

For when her warble turns sharper

Bihk Bihk in alarm like an alarm of great volume

Over and over and over and over

She warns of foul weather by ruffling her feathers  
Her brown like the brown of the water when weather  
Turns it muddy rudder right over  
And when it is over when storm clouds are older  
She warbles once more to alert all is clear  
For fear of the storms and lightning and thunder  
We left her here and found shelter in fear  
We listen for the sound of the warble grow shriller  
Or not as we hear when not near to disaster  
Look to the limpkin  
To tell us who we are  
Cowards at first when the sky is not clearer  
But dearer at last when the city is cheerful  
And our calls for mating are warbling once more  
Limpkins may marry one Limpkin forever  
Or have many other pretty limpkins to share  
A pair of limpkins is better by far  
To suss out the danger in stormy wet weather  
In refuge they sit in the sunlight for years  
In the city they are nocturnal and stick close together  
Are pests when possessed and rest not a minute  
Hunting for mates alone or in pairs  
They swim well but rarely if ever do so  
But they fly proudly  
Chest puffing forwards to show  
Enough to impress a new Limpkin in summer  
Show something akin to a firefly's glow  
Look to the Limpkin with ancestry so Latin  
Who flies over islands of chickens and sugar  
And shrieks for the wearers of thunderous water  
Unwarned by the Limpkin her tidings of weather  
It prefers the warm water to relax its feathers  
Fearing not the other birds and their stares  
But when upended by dangerous strangers  
It ranges from a shriek to a bleat in anger  
Its neck craning and bending to stare  
Flap flap flapping it's wings to announce with great furvor  
A fighter and one to cower before  
Bihk Bihk Bihk says a Limpkin with wings untucked  
A Limpkin who's certainly not one to be fucked with  
Look to the Limpkin  
To carry us forward  
Reminding us all that the worst is now over  
And knowing one nobler an unlikely venture

For fools who knew never a Limpkin before  
When we get older  
We cower in fear  
For our city our coastline our people our shore  
And who will be here  
With a safe sounding warble  
But the Limpkin to tell us all clear  
The city is yours

## Chapter 25

The two sat at the dinner table. Irma was happy with her eggs, it made her smile, but she remained quiet while eating. Vicente knew to keep quiet when she was. He had been snapped at countless times in the past for breaking a silence. He let her mind wander from panic to panic and he thought about what she was thinking. He was dying to know. Things were going to be ok, he thought, because she was putting the eggs on her bagel, something that never failed to delight her, like when she mixed ketchup and mayonnaise together to make a super sauce for her fries, a decidedly un-Cuban thing to do and not great for her health. She couldn't be miserable AND scoop the scrambled eggs onto the cream cheese and take an enormous bite. She put down the bagel and wiped her mouth with the napkin.

"You have an appointment with Dr. Schwartz on Tuesday morning."

He knew better than to argue.

"Ok."

Defeated, he looked down at his eggs. He began to drift into them. His felt the peace offered by staring deeply at the yellow translucent water leaking from middle of the plate to the lip. His mind jumped to his other son, whom he never spoke to. I'm here, waiting. There's nothing else I can do. His mind jumped to the storm. A lot of fuss over nothing. The southern tip didn't even flood. His mind jumped and jumped and jumped and jumped. His mind jumped to Irma. Oh, god have I just been staring at my food? He looked up quickly. Irma was looking at him, determined to wait until he looked up. She had an eye on the second hand of the kitchen clock that she could see over his head. Information for Dr. Schwartz. Irma was crying, softly, tears streaming over her scrunched lips and down her dimpled chin. When he began frantically to explain what it was he had been thinking about, with the recollective sharpness of a Russian chess champion reciting moves he'd made thirty years prior, she broke down. His desperate burst of excuses seemed to force tears from out of Irma's eyes. She hated this. He thought about getting angry. Sometimes when he got angry with her and ordered her to stop crying, that he was fine, that he always would be, she nodded like a little girl, snorted one last time and things were ok. His trick wouldn't work, not this time.

Instead he stood up slowly, making sure not to knock anything over, and walked quickly around to her chair, which was close enough to make out clearly. In a moment of strength, he turned her chair towards him, and away from the table. She made no move to stop him. Her head was in her hands now. This was her little girl cry, she used when she couldn't help crying any other way. Vicente knelt down and held her wrists gently in his hands, trying to pull them away from her face without her resisting. He abandoned her hands, which bounced directly back to her face, and placed his palms on her knees, like a nursery school teacher preparing to recite a rhyme or tell a story.

"Mi amor," he started.

"Sometimes when I stare into something, I go missing for a moment."

Irma looked up. He was explaining a trial separation to his daughter again, a memory he'd never lose.

"When I go missing, I'm thinking about the kids, or about home, but mostly about you my love. When I come back, I feel happy. Mostly, I understand completely that I've gone somewhere, that time has lapsed since I looked up from what I was staring at, and that this is not normal. Dr. Schwartz and I talk about it every time I go see him. It is my problem and something that he and are trying to fix."

At this, she opened her mouth quickly, offended, ready to speak, but Vicente cut her off.

"I know it is not only my problem. I know what it does to you, but you must understand mi amor that I am daydreaming, just daydreaming. I do it more now, doctor says, because my mind is idle and I am alone with it for long periods during the day."

He knew this would make her feel guilty. He wanted nothing less in the whole world.

"I enjoy it, being with my thoughts. I have a wonderful life to look back on, and a wonderful woman to spend the rest of it with."

Her sobs were subsiding. She was relishing the information. It was so hard to get anything out of him sometimes. She felt guilty, but she buried her head in her hands once more, her hands, which were already nearly dry. Keep going, she thought.

"I have been thinking a lot lately of moving."

This brought her up, stopped the fake tears.

"While you my Irma, are still a young lady..."

She gave an angry smile, sniffing.

"I admit that I am an old man. I will live for twenty more years, my love, I feel it in my bones. But I think about those twenty years every day now. I want something else for us. The kids are all grown and we have plenty of money. We could finally rent this place and move somewhere small, but beautiful, a house."



She was shocked at what she was hearing. Her last three months were spent trying to get him to throw out a ripped, oil-stained plaid shirt he wore almost every day. Now this man was telling her, after thirty years of marriage, that he wanted to move, anywhere would do, a house. This man.

"Mi amor,"

She placed her hands on his cheeks.

"Please tell me what happened to you today."

"I fell down, Irma, I fell down and when I fell down I wished the storm would come and sweep me out to sea. My eyes hurt and my thoughts jumped between dreams and real life and sleep didn't help. I can't breathe in this house. I can't breathe in this god damned apartment and I don't want to live here anymore."

"So let's go."

"Yes, let's."

"Let's do it, let's pack all of our things, and find a renter, let's do all of that and then move somewhere we've never been, where our kids won't come because it's not home."

"Irma..."

"No, Vicente, please. This is our home."

"This is not our home."

She sighed and leaned back in her chair. Same old fight, she thought.

"My love?"

"Yes."

"We, you and I, are going to move out of this apartment by the end of next month."

Her mouth gaped open. This, she thought, was new.

"We can talk about where, exactly, but one thing is for sure, I will not die in this apartment."

She stayed silent.

"I love you, madly, Irma. We are moving. I will take care of the apartment, you will find a renter, we will spend this week dreaming of where we want to live and come the end of next month, our next adventure will start."

## Chapter 26

Shot of whiskey and a beer, please?

The French perfumers, all from Grasse at some point in their lineage, loved Club Deuce. This bar, this incredible bar, had the grit they so desperately wanted on their first move to the states. All French men love Roadhouse. But Miami Beach has the overwhelming topnote of glamour, fashion and money. This bar, was a shitpot refuge in South Beach. Deuce was what they wanted, before they knew they wanted it, when they were just perfect French schoolboys playing leapfrog in the public parks in their uniforms. You got the sense immediately upon stepping through the doors that everyone in there was from the same country.

Cuba, or Poland, or Italy or Tampa. Deuce definitely had the oaky base of Polo and the male musk of Old Spice, but the topnote was hops, and hops smell like sweat socks.

The mixture of weed, whiskey, steak and beer was hitting Daniel, and he went to the bathroom to drink from the faucet. This, in his strict analytical brain, gave him at least fifteen minutes of extra time out before he absolutely had to go home. He got back on the floor to find JP and say goodbye, maybe catch the new intern Rachel and say bye to her too. He walked into the middle of the dance circle, looking over the tops of the dancing mob to find his friend. From behind him, Jean-Phillipe wrapped his arm around Daniel's neck and pulled him down and into the circle of girls he was dancing with. JP gave Daniel a big, showy kiss on the cheek in front of the group, and continued dancing. Daniel put his hand on JP's chest and shouted in his ear.

Hey, dude. I'm outta here. I'll see you tomorrow, yea?

No stay and dance?

"No, stay and dance."

He was ready to argue, to plead his case. He had definitely seen this coming. But Rachel was now in the circle and looking at the two of them. He could see himself in her eyes. He was being bullied to stay and hang out by the coolest, and most talented young perfumer in the office. Even Rachel, the intellectual of the bunch, the one who smelled bullshit as the company's base note, blushed when JP complimented her. His arm over Daniel's tall shoulder, they looked like they had been friends for years. Daniel stayed.

Daniel didn't remember exactly how it happened, though he had a good idea. For reasons beyond his understanding, he was sure that nobody saw. He imagined everyone in the same fish eye haze he and JP were in, and that no matter how many work colleagues...jesus did they really make out? He was sure that Jean-Phillipe started it, and that meant that he had just experimented, which was good, right? I mean you don't know how you are until you try. He remembered reading an article, essentially a list of all the cool actors and musicians who admitted to be bisexual at some point in their careers. Brando. He remembered Brando. He had definitely seen JP making out with at least one of the interns. Rachel? No, not her. Nothing about this made him cringe, which made him cringe. He felt cool though, like the kiss was a cementing of the arm around the shoulder. Him kissing a guy. And when Jean-Phillipe came to him blushing to apologize and ask if they were still cool, he would be so cool. No worries, he'd say, it was a crazy night.

What would happen when he came over next? If Daniel really was cool, he'd have no problem hanging out again, playing Portal 2. They had beaten the two player game, but JP wanted to go through one player mode, switching off, like

teammates merged into a single, unbeatable, portal hurling machine. The dark sky was coming, he couldn't help but be excited. The sun constantly pouring through the sheets covering his windows always made him feel lazy, and reclusive, like the Korean kids who played Counterstrike all day and night in their dorm rooms in college. Even he and his friends distanced themselves from that kind of obsession and isolation, looked down on those kids who never went to parties, but when the sun shone through the sheets, as it did every day in Miami, he felt like Nina Kim, the greatest tactical Counterstrike player he'd ever met. The storm, though, meant that Miami-Dade was essentially forcing him to stay indoors, get high, listen to records, watch porn and play video games. Jeune-Fille, as he began calling him, like the rest of his friends, would want in. Would JP try something again? Daniel felt weird. The kiss was nothing, he thought, nothing. But now what?

The next day he spotted JP in the lunchroom. It was raining. Daniel had been drinking blue Gatorade all day and eating constantly to try to absorb the alcohol. Still, he was sweating in the air conditioning and despite the three Aleve, still felt the present pressing of his brain on his head. JP looked completely fine, dressed well as usual and holding court at a lunch table with the other perfumers. Daniel sat alone on purpose. When he was nearly done eating, Jean-Phillipe came over to say hi. That's all. Just, "hey, man." Not awkward at all. No blushing anything. No acknowledgement. Daniel was confused. Maybe he was too drunk to remember? Daniel certainly wasn't. He felt himself getting pissed, for reasons he didn't understand. Daniel felt Will inside of him, felt "fag" on the tip of his tongue.

Will worked in the lab with Daniel, a chemist, and was, in Daniel's categorization, an angry geek. Will had, in Daniel's view, been exposed to well-adjusted kids too early, like not putting sunscreen on your baby. He took the same amount of shit as every other geek Daniel knew but by the time Will left for college, he was a real problem for his teachers, his parents and for the student body. By senior year they were calling him DK (he thought it was Donkey Kong, but really it stood for Dylan Klebold), which didn't help things. He didn't just not know what to say, he said the wrong things. Racist jokes, foul sexist comments. Now, years out of college, Will had an incredible new ability, like a super power. The mixture of anger and a disregard for certain social accords gave him the power to stand over any man, to dominate a room, making even the most titan-of-industry men shrink in confusion. He fundamentally didn't understand women, lusted after them furiously, and though he had always got plenty of attention from the boyish graphic novel nerdy girls in college, he was trained by World of Warcraft to want giant tits, round asses and an impossibly tiny waist, green skin, horns and a tail.

Nothing colored Daniel's upbringing more than a firm promise to himself that no matter how much he let himself indulge in the nerdy things he so adored, no matter how much he surrounded himself with people just like him, nerds, gamers and the like, he would never turn into Will. Will reminded Daniel of Spencer, his middle-school best friend. Spencer bugged out sophomore year and had to be taken out of school. Daniel felt responsible for not helping Spencer out with the anger, not listening to him more, but by freshman year Daniel couldn't stand being around him. He was a bummer, thought Daniel, a jerk. This guy's a fag, that girl's a fucking whore, one day I'll run things, have so much fucking money. On and on. Jesus. Daniel pulled away. Spencer got worse. Now Spencer worked next to him every day, talking about the faggy French perfumers and the slutty blond intern who's definitely blowing all of the faggy French perfumers.

If Will was Spencer, then Daniel was Will, as a stream of unsettling sexual thoughts ran through his head. When he was fifteen, he and three other white friends would scream the word "nigger" into couch pillows, and then die laughing. That memory made him dry heave, made his face green, made him sick to his stomach, every time it popped up from its deep corner. Now he was bouncing "fag" around the walls of his brain and the inside of his mouth. Not for laughs, but to hurt.

He felt the plaguing anxiety that had crippled his dad surging through his clenched teeth. He just wanted to hit that faggot in the face in front of all his pathetic fag friends. No, he thought, this is not cool. He told John, the head chemist, that he wasn't feeling well, and went home. The next day, he knew JP would be asking him for scent samples, bugging him with emails all day, acting like nothing happened, like they didn't kiss, like Daniel was a child for making such a big deal of it. Fuck him, he thought, fuck him.

## Chapter 27

The storm was gone and so was he. The sun was shining and his car was gone. A fling, she thought, a fun one. She began to cry.

Her thoughts turned to her kids. It was time for her to be a mother. The storm was over and she would wait, she thought, with dinner when their father drove them the long trip down. She missed them dearly, couldn't wait until there were noises in the house that didn't belong to her. They'd run to their video games and she'd be stuck with him, arrogantly kissing her on the cheek. He would want to stay the night, she thought, and she wouldn't say no. There was a guest room, hell, the king-sized bed was big enough for both of them. Mom making dinner, playing house, dad coming up behind her, kissing her like he never left, asking about the dealership, getting drunk, starting a fight, and driving back in the middle of the night leaving her wondering if he'd make it back home alive.

She couldn't stop crying now. The tears were flowing out. She didn't feel bad for herself, she had stopped allowing that a long time ago, after she started with her personal trainer. She felt tired. It wasn't sleepiness but a cumulative exhaustion, like an admission of aging.

The doorbell rang. She walked to the window, a habit she acquired after living alone. His car was back. She was angry at herself for getting excited, and decided to greet him with a frown.

"Yes?"

"Ok, so I was in the car and I was thinking, and please, bear with me here. What if..."

She was still frowning.

"...we just kept fucking."

Stunned, she sent daggers of anger into him.

"Please, Julia, hear me out."

His smirk was back. That arrogant prick. He liked that she was frowning.

"What if we fucked all day long, for the rest of the day, just stayed inside, no sunshine and we just went into your room and fucked all day, and maybe watched a movie in between, like a porno. And then, instead of leaving, I just stayed over again, but you know, only to keep fucking you."

The slightest, slightest smirk crept into the left corner of her lip, against her will. He kept going.

"And then when your kids got back, you'd say this is the man I'm fucking. And when your prick ex-husband gets to the door, I'll answer. I'll say kids, go ahead inside and play. Your dad and I are gonna have a little talk."

Her smirk left her face and a knowing, shame-on-you frown replaced it. She was still amused, he could tell. He was pushing it, though, testing his limits, and he knew it.

"And we, you and I, decided that 'hey, why not fuck all week long' and maybe while we weren't fucking each other's brains out, I could get some groceries and maybe make you dinner, you know, only to keep your strength up for more intense fucking... maybe in the ass? No? No, ok. Look I'm just spitballing, here." Shit, she thought, now I'm smiling.

"Yea, yea, yea and I could pick the kids up from school and never pretend to be their dad, just a guy who's fucking their mom, all the time, with seemingly no end in sight. And this is how things will be from now on."

"Alright stop talking, please."

"Wait, wait, there's more. I planned this out in the car. You'll promise me that you'll come out with me, and do things with me, so I can tell all my friends that this is the chick I'm fucking and they won't think I'm making it up."

She walked into his arms.

"You really need to shut the fuck up."

"But I wanna keep talking about fucking you." He was whining.

She looked up at him with a smiling scowl.

"Alright, alright, I'll shut up."

They hugged, standing still there for a moment.

"Julia, I'm not gonna leave again, or I don't want to, unless you get really tired of me and kick me out. I mean I'll leave, obviously, but I'm gonna keep coming back, until you tell me not to."

She didn't move, just kept holding on to him.

"That was the grossest thing I've ever heard."

He let out a pleased, roaring laugh, like a viking.

She craned her neck up to kiss him on the lips, once, softly, grabbed his hand and brought him through the doorway.

## Chapter 28

This is the NHC with another important message. In the wake of Irene comes:

**TONY**

*(spoken)*

Maria . . .

*(sings)*

The most beautiful sound I ever heard:

Maria, Maria, Maria, Maria . . .

All the beautiful sounds of the world in a single word . .

Maria, Maria, Maria, Maria . . .

Maria!

I've just met a girl named Maria,

And suddenly that name

Will never be the same

To me.

Maria!

I've just kissed a girl named Maria,

And suddenly I've found

How wonderful a sound

Can be!

Maria!

Say it loud and there's music playing,

Say it soft and it's almost like praying.

Maria,

I'll never stop saying Maria!

The most beautiful sound I ever heard.

Maria.

4:59 PM

**me:** you first or me?

**Scott:** me I think

**me:** ok lets stand

Dear Mr. Hackman,

I hope this unsolicited email finds you well. I wanted to ask for your permission, or, in case this message reaches you after August 22<sup>nd</sup>, beg for your forgiveness for using your full name as the title for an installation and performance piece my friend Scott and I are putting on in Miami. I assure you that the reason for using your name is as unclear to us as it must be to you, considering our performance has nothing to do with you, your acting career or any aspect of your perceived character. It is, or was, a perfect moment of directionless inspiration on the part of my colleague.

Gene Hackman.

If you believe in the marvels of the human subconscious, it would interest you to know that we are both great admirers of your body of work, one of subtle yet undeniable brilliance. You are, for us, the actor, Doyle to Royal. Sometimes a certainty this strong is difficult to repress.

In the event that I am correct. In the event that you do, in fact, sit in your library in a blue button-down and boxer briefs, sipping a working man's scotch and googling yourself, please disregard whatever minor press may come from this event and dismiss the whole thing as two admirers name-dropping a legend.

Sincerely,

Timothy Stanley

