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Greetings from Eureka!:

A Story Quartet and Critical Afterword

By

Roman Sauls

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Graduation *summa cum laude*

and for Graduation with Honors from the Department of Liberal Studies

University of Louisville

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Introduction

Two years ago, in late spring, a voice of many voices suddenly spoke to me. It told me the story of three college friends who began to lead increasingly different lives and drift slowly but surely away from one another. It told me the story of Suzanna Álvarez, a fencing prodigy, whose life never recovered from having that sport and passion taken from it. It told me the story of Georgia Clarke, a chronic smoker, whose self-worth relied on the validation of people growing ever-distant from her. It told me the story of Itsuki Yashima, an obsessive scholar, whose greatest and most potent strength was the zeal that would also propel him to dark and gruesome depths. This voice did not only unfurl these lives to me, but the narrative tapestry interwoven between them, too, a shared world of loss and dissolution.

I have, in the twenty months since the voice first spoke to me, undertaken a relentless creative process to nurture the fertile narrative landscape it offered. This process has included scholarship in several creative writing workshops, in-depth review of countless peer critiques, several lengthy discussions with professors and mentors, and my participation in an Axton masterclass. It has been an intense and demanding journey, but it has developed the frayed threads of that voice into full, satisfactory stories. I ask that you consider, then, that the following four narratives are not only the end result of a deep creative unfolding but perfect exemplars of the unfolding itself, of how paltry seeds can grow into great trees, of how small voices heard in your head can become large and even unwieldy works of art.

And while this specific quartet is not a stand-in for the larger world of possible stories, it does represent the thematic, structural, and artistic vision that I hope to accomplish as I further refine and explore the interwoven world of Suzanna, Georgia, and Itsuki.

— ✶ —

The Snow in Sarajevo

We concocted the plan after Suzanna told us a fencing tournament would keep her in Bosnia for most of the fall. Itsuki asked where in Bosnia and she said Sarajevo and he nearly jumped out of his chair. He held a finger down on the page of his book and delivered a monologue on how it was called the Jerusalem of Europe, how there was all this religion, all this history, packed into one little city. I said that the trip sounded nice, and Itsuki snapped that he'd cut off his leg to go.

"You could," she'd said. "Go, you know."

He'd closed his book. "Really?"

"You both could, couldn't you?"

There was a moment, a pause, looks shot from one face to the next. It was excitement, curling up along the ridges of our cheeks. It was relief, too. Secretly, I think Itsuki and I were terrified of going a whole season without Suzanna in the middle.

We figured Itsuki could make the case to his department that a trip to Sarajevo, a seat of power in a recently collapsed socialist state, would be an invaluable research opportunity. I could sell it to mine just on the architecture, if only for the whole host of museums it boasted. We scheduled meetings, signed forms, got funding. Itsuki would construct a research project on the interaction between socialism and Catholicism in the history of Sarajevo. I'd write one on museum curation and the responsibility of hosting artifacts of recently ended wars, i.e. the one that had torn apart Yugoslavia just a couple years prior. Suzanna would, naturally, fence.

August came around and we jumped on a plane together and touched down in that quiet Dunabian metro. Our host family, or host couple, more accurately, met us at the gates. Adin, this tall, bulky man, packed our luggage into the back of the car while Ena, his wife, checked and double-checked that we were who we claimed to be. They had hosted students from America before, apparently, and once, a lunatic pretended to be one and stayed with

them for a couple days before the university got in touch and asked why their student had been stranded at the airport for thirty-six hours. Despite that one mishap, the exchange program liaison had assured me, Suzanna, and Itsuki that Adin and Ena were one of the most well-regarded host families that he'd ever worked with. And, of all the truths we uncovered there in Sarajevo, this was the most evident. They treated us like royalty the entire season.

We ate home-cooked meals every night, true and honest Bosnian meals. We had *klepe* and *cevapi* and *dolma*. We had *talumba* for dessert. Once we were better acquainted, and had bickered over poker one night, Adin treated us to the moonshine he brewed in the basement. We drank lightly during the week and hard on the weekends. My smoking habit got worse because Ena smoked too, and, in August and September, when it was warm, we'd sit out on the patio and go through half a pack. She talked about the war then and only then, cigarette hanging half out her mouth, going in detail about how Sarajevo smelled like oil and flesh, how she couldn't rid herself of the scent for months. October rolled around, and Itsuki's birthday reared its head. Adin called in a favor from a war buddy in Berlin for a first edition Max Adler. Me and Suzanna sat on the back patio while Itsuki cried into his sweatshirt. And when the snow came the next month, we were never asked to shovel, never asked to de-ice the car or clean out the gutters, never asked to lift a finger.

This became the topic of discussion years later when the three of us met at Shavahn's, a pub in our part of Philadelphia. The more we talked about it, the more we detailed how little we had helped this host family during our stay, the worse we felt, and the more insidious that autumn and winter became. The August afternoon we'd spent near the river had a different tone when we realized Ena had sat far away, sweltering in the heat in a baggy crew neck sweater. We remembered that she had worked late at the veterinarian's office two weeks in a row in October, and that, by the time she got home, Adin was already in bed snoring, every

night without fail. And we remembered the day in November when Ena went missing, and how easily we'd all moved on from it.

Itsuki pushed away his plate at its mention. "What a sad thing to bring up."

"What's it matter if it's sad?" Suzanna asked.

"She looked so different," I said. "She was a completely different person when we found her in Liberation Square that morning."

From what we could remember, things started on a Saturday with noon chiming on the grandfather clock. I wandered out into the living room in a hung-over stupor. It was a desolate scene: Itsuki spread out on the rug, arms wrapped around one leg of the coffee table, hugging it tightly; Adin knocked out, legs spread, on the sofa next to him. Suzanna and I had made it to our beds. Ena, too, or at least we'd assumed.

The room was strewn with blankets that had been thrown around during our version of a rave. Adin liked playing old Bosnian club records and teaching us how he used to dance in the eighties, before the war. Half-eaten grilled cheeses sat on the nightstands, products of a sudden craving that we had apparently left remnants of everywhere. An umbrella stuck out from a pile of pillows on the other side of the room. And then there were the mason jars, the half-full glasses that lined the coffee table, the mantle, the narrow edge of the TV stand and made the whole room smell like alcohol and sugarcane.

I creeped by just in time to watch Itsuki sit up and hit his head against the top of the coffee table. I tried to stifle a laugh but I was too hungover, I suspect, and it burst out of me anyway. I don't feel great about it.

"Fuck you, Georgina," he said, weilding my full name like it meant something. It didn't— Georgina and Georgia are basically the same—, but I never had the heart to tell him.

This woke Adin up, who couldn't sleep through a fly circus. On the nights he had to get up early, we'd tip-toe around, avoiding the spots where the floorboards sunk and creaked

like tortured mice. He was a mailman, though, so his schedules were somewhat consistent, routed and all, meaning we always knew when a night was going to be loud and full and lived and when we had to act as good as dead.

Me, Itsuki, and Adin started on breakfast, or lunch, morelike. Pans came down off the little nubs he and Ena hung them on along the backsplash. Egg cartons came out of the fridge, forks to whisk. We must have been thunderous, because Suzanna woke up and joined us halfway to the finish line. She staggered out in these matching candy-cane pajamas. She'd tied up her hair the night before, amazingly, so it hung nicely behind her head rather than sticking out in every cardinal direction, as it usually did in the mornings. I asked for a smoke break and the other chefs obliged. I'm not sure how Suzanna ended up with me, whether she came up and asked to go outside, or if I had asked her, or if we had acknowledged that we wanted to stand in the bitter cold together without really saying anything, but the next thing I remember we were standing in the bitter cold together not really saying anything.

"That plum," She said, "Fucking dangerous."

We were talking about the moonshine. Plum, one of the many flavors we downed over and over again while we stayed at the house. Pineapple was also a fan favorite. There was an ongoing tift between Itsuki and Adin about whether the apricot tasted more like peach or, as intended, like apricot. Everyone else stayed out of it.

I nodded and lit the cigarette. "I don't even feel bad."

"Me neither, really."

"He probably charms it, right?"

She laughed. "Charms?"

"The only way you can get that good of moonshine that consistently is seance," I explained, taking a drag.

"It's *rakija*, right? That's what they call it."

“What’re you, Itsuki?”

She hadn’t liked that. “Very funny.”

“Mhm.”

“What?” She asked.

“What?” I had asked back.

A regular miscommunication between us. I had a tendency to sigh, to murmur, to hum and hmm without meaning, but the low tone of it, the quietness, made both Suzanna and Itsuki unbelievably nervous, as if I was talking shit under my breath. I never understood it.

“It’s nothing, I promise.”

She nodded. “The snow’s different here.”

“It’s European.”

“It’s chic.”

We laughed a little and looked around. The snow was clean and clear and apparently unAmerican. It drifted in dunes against the cottages and piled up in sheets on the tops of the mailboxes. They stuck out like tic-tacs along the covered roads. Cathedrals rang out Sunday bells. We could hear snow crumbling off the roofs of the houses, icicles falling to shattering deaths from the frozen gutters. Some pigeons landed on a nearby telephone pole. They pecked at the wood, as tough as it was, and left for another perch. The dark green Cooper in the driveway sat cold and dead, covered in snow and ice like everything else.

I felt the moisture of my breath collecting along the ridge of my nose. I took a drag from the cigarette. Suzanna turned to me and just stared.

“What?” I asked.

“What?” She asked back.

She was framed perfectly against the snow. The bold features, the sharp jawline, the thick black hair, the blue-grey eyes. The light bled bright and white behind her. She was

perfect for the scene. We stared at each other for a long time, not saying anything, just reflecting two half-baked smiles, lips twitching, eyes watering.

Itsuki swung open the door behind us and the warmth of the house swallowed us in overwhelming billows. Whatever feeling had graced me and Suzanna seemed to melt away.

"Food's ready," he said.

I nodded. "I'll finish this one."

Suzanna shivered and looked over at me. "I think I'll go in now."

I nodded again and they shut the door behind me. I remember feigning a smile, the one that pins unnaturally to your cheeks like strings on a puppet, or that thing you'd do in elementary school where you pull your lips along on an invisible thread. It has a baked feeling in my face, even now. Even then.

I looked back out to the snow and the ice and all the dunes. There was this funhouse mirror quality to it. It was pale and white and undisturbed. I looked down at my feet, as if I was on a frozen pond, expecting to see myself reflected in that frigid way. It was just my boots, black mounds sticking out of all that white. I puttered out the last of my cigarette and threw it between my feet. It sunk silently into the snow and crackled in a desperate gasp. The wind came down off the curves of the houses and blew through me.

I went inside and joined everyone else. The plates and bowls were being shuffled to the big dining room table, the oak thing Adin told us he built from wood he found in rubble during the war. He wasn't a veteran, no, he assured us, but he had seen the shit, so to speak. We'd sit around during the real late nights, drunk, only able to listen, and absorb his stories of carrying bodies across the plaza or patching up leg after leg or avoiding gunfire. I tried to not think of it every time we sat down to eat, but I was sure the wood beneath our plates had been stained with blood, guts, and worse.

This is when I noticed the empty chair.

"Is Ena alright?" I asked.

He nodded vigorously. "Oh yes, she's out, I think. She'll be home soon."

"I want to talk to her about that Grier piece."

"No, no, no," Adin said, pointing his fork at Itsuki, "This is between you and me."

"She'll have an opinion, won't she?"

Ena was an artist, and a part-time veterinarian. We learned the latter first, as Adin and Ena sat us down and told us about themselves our very first night in Bosnia. She'd gotten into animal care during the war, helping her family keep the farm in rural Montenegro. She moved to Bosnia, Sarajevo, the house, when she met Adin on a whim at a bar when he was in town for the burial of a friend. It was only later, in September, maybe, when we gained access to the studio, this room at the end of the house, and all her art. She did collages, mostly, lovingly shattered depictions of the communities in Sarajevo, of what she remembered of Montenegro. Grier was a semi-famous French collagist that Adin and Itsuki had varying interpretations of.

"If he had meant for it to be Persephone," Adin had said, "He'd have included something beautiful, no? But it's ugly, it's drab. His intentions are different."

Itsuki shook his head. "That's the point, Adin. It's Persephone, but the ugly one."

"Oh, please, you look at a piece of art and give it whatever meaning you want."

"That's art, though, isn't it?" Suzanna asked

The question hung in the air over us a serious detour until Adin swallowed it and spit back up as a gregarious laugh. The house filled with his music and we joined him in his playing, in slapping the wood of the table. Itsuki did that often. I tried not to.

We cleaned up the house after brunch. Mason jars got washed in droves. Adin stepped out to clean the snow off the car and the gutters. Blankets were folded and placed neatly next to the quilted pillows. For such a nice house, and such nice hosts, the decor was less than satisfactory. Suzanna commented on it a lot in our first couple weeks, how the plaid of the

throw blanket in the living room clashed hideously with the paisley of the couch, how the paisley of the couch was hideous in its own rite. But we grew to love it, I think, this strange mix-matched place. It was no secret to any of us how romantic everything was. At Shavahn's, Itsuki illuminated the idea of pre-nostalgia for us.

"It's a modern thing, you know," he'd said. "Kids, us kids, and kids now, have so much going on, that time feels shorter, that a year feels like what a decade might've felt like to an eighteenth century farmer. So we get nostalgic quicker. We want it quicker, even."

Suzanna had laughed. "That's certainly a theory."

I knew she felt it, though, or did then, at least. Sitting in the living room after lunch, we lounged around and talked like we were wine moms or Nicholas Spark characters. The light of the afternoon peaked through the back windows and filled the house with a kind of lift, a sense of buoyancy. Suzanna told us about how her dad had avoided a two-engine failure in his early days of being a pilot and how she wished he hadn't stopped flying. Itsuki and I pretended to agree, though we both had interacted with Mr. Alvarez enough to know the skies were much safer without him.

"I didn't even get sick on the way here," she went on.

Itsuki hummed. "Lucky you."

"Oh, I didn't mean to be rude, I—"

We'd hit some rough turbulence on our way to Bosnia, somewhere over Nantes, and Suzanna acted like the wind was just passing through. The plane was shaking, babies crying, seatbelt light on, and there she was, blaring a cassette into these big headphones, not a care in the world. It did such a number on Itsuki that he had to excuse himself several times for the remainder of the flight to throw up the complimentary chicken parm we'd been served just a couple hours earlier. Suzanna had asked him if he was alright, and he had gotten red in the face about it, more red than the strain of puking had already made him.

"It's alright," he said, finally. "I've got to work on my thing anyway."

Thing was his word for the research project. He was having trouble interpreting the work of a little known Yugoslavian activist that had been influential in nurturing socialist sentiments in Catholic communities in the early twentieth century. It was as esoteric as his studies got, as much as he hated the world being applied to anything he did. *I can point to it on a map,* he'd say. *What do you do? Art history isn't esoteric?* It was, and I'd admit that time and time again. It was his stance against his own work being esoteric, being abstract, being completely out of the realm of normalcy, that made it enticing to call it so.

He got up, grabbed his laptop off the coffee table, and headed back to Ena's studio. She had let him set up camp there since his work had hit its rocky shore. He'd been crying on the back patio, a week or two before, in the freezing cold, and she'd brewed him some tea for him to sip on while she talked him down. They sat out in the flurries for an hour, and, when they came back in, he was smiling for the first time in a month. The inspiration came in waves, but he was slowly moving his ship toward port, wherever that was. The door to the studio shut with a loud slam.

"Christ," Suzanna said.

"It's fine."

"It really isn't."

I shrugged. "You didn't mean anything."

"It doesn't matter with him."

"Just spar it out."

She laughed. "But can't we spar with *words*?"

Suzanna drug out the phrase with this obnoxious charm, feigning seriousness, sarcasm that knew it was sarcasm. It was intoxicating, always was to me. She leaned forward, the little

black hairs she'd let hang down from her ponytail curtaining her face, and smiled at me. I felt the air between us moisten again. The grin faded and she retreated back to the couch.

"Do you… ?" I felt my mouth say.

She went pale. "Do I what?"

The phrase had left my lips before I had a chance to consider them. There were so many moments then, in that year particularly, where the air was damp and hot and I could feel my heart beating in the skin, on the back of my neck like a blood-full tic, the yearning monarch of my desire. I so wanted to pop the bubble, to say something other than:

"Do you want to go with me Tuesday? To the art archives?"

The color returned to her face. She made overtures of wanting to go, I remember, but we never did. I wandered the dim halls of the museum basement by myself almost the entire week, jotting down the details of my exploration that would be useful in my paper. We started to avoid one another, never staying in the same place as anyone else for very long, and then it was time to leave Bosnia altogether. We jumped on a plane in early December, in the middle of the coldest day of that year. Leaving was the last thing we did together.

The door to Ena's studio opened with a screech and we looked back. Itsuki didn't appear at first, just the darkness of the hallway and the black hole of the open door. He stepped out gingerly into the hall, finally, marveling at something in his hands. We watched as he approached us slowly and held out a black box. It was Ena's phone.

"This is weird, right?" He asked.

Suzanna looked back at me, as if I had the answer. I didn't. I only knew that it Ena had been gone since at least noon, likely longer, something like four or five hours, and that she hadn't taken the car, and that she hadn't taken her phone. I felt moisture again, but only from my palms, the sweat seeping from my pores and sticking to the faux-felt insides of my pants pockets until they became small saunas.

"Is Adin still outside?" Itsuki asked.

Suzanna shook her head and moved to the door. She threw a scarf around her neck, slipped on some boots, and went outside. Itsuki came to the edge of the couch and dangled the device over the edge, like a cat bearing a rat-sized trophy in its teeth.

"This is weird, right? I'm not crazy?" he asked again.

"You're not crazy."

"So it *is* weird?"

"I think it's Ena's phone," I'd said.

He gave me an eye, this silent *fuck you* that was so him.

"It might be a little strange, yeah."

Adin came inside right after Suzanna and took his time to defrost before getting to us. The ice was practically hanging off his ears, forming ridges and canyons along his gloves, but he'd gotten the job done, had cleaned out the gutters and cleaned off the car. The grass was all yellow and dead underneath the snow, he'd added. He took Ena's phone from Itsuki.

"Oh, Ena, my love, my love," he tittered. "She forgot her phone."

"Yes, right," was all Itsuki could say.

Adin took it and moved to the kitchen. "I should buy her one of those hip things, so she can keep it with her. When she comes home, I'll tell her."

Suzanna looked at me again. I shrugged.

"Will she be okay?" she asked.

He looked over at us. "Ena's a capable woman."

"It's just," Itsuki started, "Getting cold is all."

"*Getting* cold. It is cold!"

He yell-laughed that gregarious, slightly obnoxious way and whatever ice was forming on our spines, on our necks, melted. We laughed with him, again, smiles fading into

blank faces. Suzanna unwrapped the scarf from her neck and slipped off the boots. Itsuki disappeared into the studio again.

As the afternoon wore on, and the sun dipped below the horizon, it became clear how unfunny the whole thing really was. The yellow of the street lamps outside began to bleed through the window, and the buoyancy of the house sunk hard and fast. Itsuki was nowhere to be seen, and Suzanna and I were heads down in our studies at the dining room table. Adin started pacing the house sometime around dark, murmuring in Bosnian.

I looked up at Suzanna at the first word of it. He'd made it a point the whole season not to speak in Bosnian around us, especially when it was just to Ena. None of us knew the language, and the two of them felt using it around students made them feel stupid and created unncessary tension betwen them, the hosts, and us, the guests. But here he was, washing the mason jars for a second time, whispering to himself in a language that was very clearly not English, French, German, or anything else Suzanna and I vaguely knew.

He kept on. The night settled over us. By the time Itsuki came out, and announced he'd made a major breakthrough, Adin was hovering over the oven, making dinner, sweating bullets. We talked in broken French about what to do. Itsuki mispronounced 'to do' and it became the word for fair, for carnival, for a show. I could tell Suzanna wanted to correct him, but she held her tongue. Dinner was elaborate. Broiled steak, for everyone. He even made a plate for Ena. He had mashed potatoes, had seasoned them, had whisked them with Bosnian cream and butter, luxuries they'd kept in supply from Ena's friends in the dairy business. There were brussel sprouts, just as wonderfully spiced and grilled. We had glasses of wine put in front of us, if we wanted, and water, juice, milk, if we didn't. Halfway through the meal, Adin slammed his hand on the table and shook his head.

"Where is she, you know?"

Itsuki shook his head, hearing *do you know?* instead of *you know?*, I assumed.

"It's just late," he said. "Maybe she got lost."

Suzanna nodded. "Yeah, maybe."

I took a bite. "Have you checked the closets?"

Suzanna cocked her head at me, a familiar move that meant something along the lines of *what the fuck are you talking about?* I was trying to be funny, trying to defuse the situation. I was trying to do what she did, just with a lot less charm.

"No, no no, that's—" He stammered, still sweating. "Let's do that yeah?"

Itsuki and Adin turned over the bedroom, flipping over the duvet, clearing out the under-bed, pushing aside the coats and the dresses that hung in the wardrobe. Suzanna put on her boots and cleared out the backyard and threw open the big latched door to the shed and checked there, too. I found myself alone in her studio. It was a little, square room with a single window, and it was her refuge, a place away from seemingly everything. The beige walls were covered with sketches and paintings and color pencil portraits. The drawing desk sat beneath the window, draped in yellow light from the street lamp. Papers with blue and red scribbles littered the surface. Pens huddled together in old jars along the back edge. There were rulers and straight-edges. There was a full circle protractor laying near to me.

I picked it up and imagined me and Suzanna and Itsuki and Adin running along its edge, picking apart the house for the crevice Ena had escaped into. I imagined us inching along the circle like, if only we kept going, kept throwing open the cupboards, the closets, the wardrobes, we could get back to the point we had missed, circle back around ourselves, and find Ena sitting at her desk or laying asleep in bed or blaring Björk in the shower, like we could go the full three hundred and sixty degrees and somehow throw time in reverse. This is not what happened. We made the house look like a FEMA camp and still got nowhere.

"Where could she have gone?" Suzanna asked.

Adin, somehow sweating more, collapsed against one of the dining room chairs and shook his head. We stood around, panting, beside ourselves with confusion. I looked at Itsuki in a rare moment of telepathy and we sent words to each other. *What the hell is this about?* We motioned, green eyed, brown eyed, *Ena's an adult, can't she take care of herself? And why is Adin sweating so goddamn much?*

"Maybe she went to church," He said, finally. "Yes, yes, ah, she could have. She's been talking about wanting to go back to her mother's church."

He stood and moved to the door and wrapped himself up so tight in his coat that his cheeks puffed out like one of those stress toys that sit in the dishes in a psychiatrist's office. We didn't move and then he made a face like *well, come on,* and we sprang into action, pushing our feet haphazardly into our boots, tightening our coats, pulling on hats and scarves. There was a great commotion and then a pause and then me, saying like an idiot:

"Wouldn't it be better if we split up?"

I've killed myself over this question. I asked it, I think, because I wanted to get Suzanna alone, to get some semblance or recognition or reassurance of the moment we had almost had before Itsuki tore us away. I've considered, however, that if I hadn't asked it, I might've never spotted Ena, and we likely would've never known where she went off to that day. I've considered that, if I hadn't asked it, I might've never known that Itsuki does indeed have limits to his confrontational capacity. I've considered that, if I hadn't, I might've gotten the moment I was trying to find with Suzanna in the organic unfolding of our search. But regardless, of the threads of if I hadn't, I did, and Suzanna readily agreed.

Adin nodded. "Good idea, Georgina."

He'd picked up, somewhere, at some time, Itsuki's sarcastic habit of using my full name. It didn't irritate me when either of them did it, though Adin usually said it in much calmer, kinder voice than Itsuki ever did.

"Oh, yeah, yes," Suzanna stammered. "I can go with you, Adin."

This meant that Itsuki and I would go on foot, together, a plan that neither of us were too happy about. We laughed about it at Shavahn's as the third round came down from the pretty waiter we'd all been flirting with, but, at the time, it was of grave importance to us. We used our telepathy again in agreement of our mutual discomfort, *I'm not happy either*.

It was decided that Suzanna and Adin would drive the Cooper to the church on the other side of town, the one that Ena's mother had gone to for a number of years, and me and Itsuki, the leftovers, would circle the local area in case she was on her way back or had never left the neighborhood at all and was stowed away in a snowbank, waiting to pop out as soon as we left the house. Adin's demeanour made the absurd feel possible.

Itsuki and I watched the car pull out of the driveway and trail through the snow until it got to the stop sign and turned out of view. We headed down the street in the direction of the plaza church, per Adin's recommendation. It had been a place of safety for women and children during the war, and Ena's fascination with it made it a candidate. It was only in these passing mentions that the war was ever really brought up. At Shavahn's, Itsuki talked at length about the conflict that had torn apart the Balkans just years before we arrived.

"Do you remember Adin's friend from the war?" He had asked.

We admitted that we only knew him from what he had done for Itsuki, that he had delivered on a first edition copy of Adler's *The Marxist Conception of the State*.

"Well," he'd said. "I looked him up. They tried him for war crimes."

Suzanna had gasped. "And?"

"Electric chair."

Walking around Sarajevo, hunting for Ena, we could feel the phantom of war hanging over us, like a vulture over the nation. Ena's words. You could see it in the haunted gazes, the distant eyes that were a mile away even as they looked straight at you. Depressive, not out of

sadness but out of inevitability. Revelation predicted a loud apocalypse, but in Bosnia it felt slow and grueling. Quiet, quiet, quiet desperation. It was a malaise that said, ye weary know best, the angle of peace is ephemeral, the zeitgeist, the beating wings of the present, forever here and forever fleeting, *vrijeme i miro, tišli, zajedno kroz prozor* (Adin's words). There was an anxiety baked into everything, even the dirt.

We made it to the plaza church, finally, but it was fruitless. It was closed for the day because the priest had contracted illness on a recent mission to Angola and succumbed to it two nights back in the cold of the winter. The little woman at the shop next door told us that when I went up to pay for cigarettes and the Bosnian equivalent of a Redbull. She told me I had nice eyes, which I wore with pride for the remainder of our stay. Itsuki contended for a while that the woman was talking about him, actually, but dropped the act by the time we got back to Philadelphia.

The plan hadn't been devised beyond that. Adin wasn't keen on detailing other locations, perhaps even willingly against doing so in the stupor of his sweat-drenched panic, so we stood around for a while arguing over what to do. Itsuki thought it'd be best to go back to the house and wait for Suzanna and Adin to return or, better yet, for Ena to return herself. I disagreed, for whatever reason. The debate waged on as we meandered around the plaza until I saw the peeking tower of a cathedral in the distance.

"Like what?" Itsuki asked.

"Like a north star," I explained. "We just find a peak and we go there. If we don't find her, we go to the next one."

"That feels pointless."

I shrugged. "But what if she's there?"

This *there* would have meant anywhere, but I knew that I could appeal to his sense of competition by merely suggesting we could find Ena before the other two and somehow gain

better favor than just waiting around the house for the resolution of the situation to drop in our laps. His attitude changed quickly and suddenly it became a game. I'd point out a church tower and he'd race me to it. We'd talk to the priest doing nightly prayers, the nun preparing tomorrow's service, and then we'd find the next tower and race again and talk to the next priest, the next nun, the next good Christian. We did this for a half hour or more. She wasn't at Saint Joseph's, or Saint Anthony's, or at the New Temple, which we tried just in case she had made a change of heart in the early hours of the morning and converted to Judaisim. We checked a mosque, too, just for good measure. She wasn't there either. Finally, we find ourselves at the Serbian Orthodox, extending out of the local area we'd been allotted.

"It's almost enough, isn't it?" Itsuki asked, shutting the door to the church.

"What?"

"All that." He said, motioning to the building, the snow hanging to its slanted roofs. "It's almost enough to make you do something."

I didn't understand. "Do what?"

"I don't know. To think it's real. To do something about it, to escape to a convent and become a nun."

"You want to become a nun?"

He laughed. "I want to escape to a convent."

"Do you?"

"I'm just rambling," he said, looking up at the stained glass windows behind us. "It's just really pretty. It's tempting."

"Yeah," I said, looking at the rising little turrets, the steeples, the way they seemed to puncture the sky so effortlessly. "It is."

We walked down from the steps and away from the congregation and the traditions. The middle of Sarajevo opened up in front of us. We were at another plaza, though this one

was the grandest we'd seen yet. We'd end up knowing it as Liberation Square, but, at that point, it stuck out merely as better than the rest. Some geese flew overhead, black against the pale clouds. The area around us was lined with brittle, barren trees. Winter bushes sat stout and narrow between them, trimmed to fill whatever gaps there were. In the middle of the square, there stood a large metal sculpture.

It showed a man standing on a large pedestal, arms stretched skyward, encased in the steel meridians of the earth, unfinished, and, in his hands, he gripped the unattached lines, as if he was about to make the planet whole. Doves were perched along the thin frame, pulling the lines together. A war monument in the truest sense. And there, sitting on the raised bricks that curtained the square was Ena, wrapped up in a fur coat, staring at it.

"And that was that?" Suzanna had asked us at Shavahn's. "I know, but it's still so…"

Itsuki nodded and drank some beer. "We were looking for an hour or more by then, right? It's pretty fucking deserved at that point. Where were you and Adin? Somewhere near the river? Was it frozen?"

"River yeah, frozen yeah. Hadn't you just walked out of a church?" She asked.

This was another moment of telepathy between Itsuki and I, only we'd gotten better at it and didn't need the side glance like we had done in Sarajevo. I could feel the pulse in his head get stronger and the food in his mouth lose its flavor, the whole sensorial faculty shuttering in one thought, *she can't be serious*.

"If you say it was god—"

She interrupted him. "I'm not saying it was anything. I just asked if you'd walked out of the church. Right? There's the Orthodox right there near the square."

Itsuki and I never directly answered her, because if we had, she'd go in on what we then called the gospel, these little monologues she gave about the mysticism of it all, how warm and mysterious this universe of ours was, how we were so small and weak in light of

all that we did not know and, no she wouldn't put Yahweh off the table, and, no she wouldn't stop appropriating Buddhism, and no, she wouldn't stop driving up to see Gideon, even if he wasn't that great of a guy, i.e. no one she should be sleeping with.

These were the thoughts of kids, I should say, and we were mean ones at that.

After we'd parried this hippie rabbit hole, she asked, again, what had happened and we, again, misled her. This had been done on Ituski's request. We told her that the both of us had gone over and talked to Ena and that she had just been loitering around town after church let out and that the three of us sat and watched the new sculpture go up in Liberation Square.

What really happened was me elbowing Itsuki and saying, "Look, holy shit."

We stood, pale as ghosts, cold as ghosts, too, and watched her for a moment, watched her watch the crew. Itsuki's teeth chattered in the wind.

"Georgia, I—"

I looked at him. He could see it, too. He could see that she was completely relaxed and in no hurry to get anywhere, in no hurry to get home to us, to Adin, to the house or the studio. He could see that she had just wrapped a fur coat around those thick-knit pajamas of hers and left. He could see that she had certainly not been to church.

"What do we do?" He asked.

"I guess go get her."

I started down the steps, but Itsuki did not follow. I looked back at him.

He looked down at me, just from two steps up, and shook his head. His teeth were chattering again but I didn't feel any wind. The thin black hair above his eyes laid flat and still, peeking out from his sock toboggan. I gave a look and he shook his head again.

Later, when we got home and delivered Ena back into the house, he asked me to leave that part out and certainly not to tell Suzanna, less her image of him be ruined. I agreed to it, though I had doubts about what kind of image she really had of him.

I left him at the steps and walked down into the square. The snow was thinner, softer, more walkable. I pushed it around with the tip of my boot and made little patterns in the stuff. The construction was getting loud. Ena closed her eyes for a second and opened them again when it got quiet. I inched closer and felt my heart beat against my chest. I came into view and there was no avoiding it then.

"Georgia," She said, happily, innocently, as if we were running into each other at the grocery store or our kid's football game.

I waved. "You doing okay?"

"Oh, I'm great," She said. "Just watching the new art."

She pointed to the crew. One of them looked over and waved and smiled. She smiled back and I smiled back and the man went back to working.

"Want to sit?" She asked.

I looked back at Itsuki. He was scribbling something down in a pocket notebook.

"Sure."

We sat in silence for what felt like an hour. We sat, still, watching nothing, watching the metal man assemble the metal world with the help of his metal birds. And then:

"I guess we should go home now."

I didn't know what to say. "Yeah, I guess we should."

I wished for a long time that more than that had happened, that she had said something deeper, something more profound, that she told me that the metal man in front of us looked like he was building a metal cage and not the world, or that the world was a cage, or that a cage can be a world, or that doves are just birds and cannot deliver peace, or that it doesn't always have to be a man, or that it doesn't always have to be a Man, or that she needed to get out, or that she needed to leave the house, or that she needed to leave Bosnia and come back to Philadelphia with us. But she didn't. She didn't say any of that.

She just got up from the square, took a last look at the statue, and led me and Itsuki back to the house. And, when we got there, she called Adin on the phone that she'd left in the studio, and, fifteen minutes later, he and Suzanna pulled into the driveway and joined us in the house and we celebrated Ena's return and laughed about the whole affair, as if it had just been good fun all along and we were only now getting the joke.

We returned to our food, microwaved it, and dined together with Ena. Itsuki argued with Adin over whether the apricot tasted like peach or, as intended, like apricot. The next morning we were hung over again and sprawled out together in the living room again, only that time, Ena was with us, too, curled up in a ball at the foot of the loveseat, on the rug near the fireplace, hugging herself tightly.

"It didn't feel the same anymore," Suzanna had noted at Shavahn's, stacking our plates together for the cute waiter to pick up.

Itsuki nodded. "No, it didn't. Three weeks and we were gone."

"I still don't really understand."

"I'm not sure we ever will."

I listened to them pass the baton of uncertainty back and forth for a few minutes before I noticed Itsuki's face contorting slightly, bunching up in little wrinkles on the high bridge of his nose, the slim strait of skin between the eyes. There was something there.

"Did you look Adin up?" I asked.

"What?"

He went pale, as pale as he could.

"When you looked into the friend, did you look into Adin?"

Suzanna went a little slack jaw and looked over at me, sending the message, *good fucking call*, and the longer Itsuki took to answer the worse the both of us felt about it and the worse the dinner felt and the more it seemed like the whole night was a mistake.

He shrugged, finally. “I can’t find them. I can’t find either of them in Sarajevo, or in Bosnia for that matter. Or in Europe.”

Neither Suzanna or I asked another question. The possibility that they had vanished into thin air was enough to stomp out our curiosity. Itsuki downed the last of his drink and shrugged, sending us *you shouldn’t have asked*.

The cute waiter came and picked up our plates and glasses and left us the check, which did not have his number scribbled on it, but instead had the hefty total of our dinner, our four rounds of drinks, and the desserts we had ordered at the last minute. We went around in circles deciding who would pay until I thrust my card into the waiter’s hand and he smiled in the painfully polite kind of way and scurried off to ring it up.

This is when Suzanna told us she was moving to Boston to open up her own fencing studio. It was the reason she’d convened us at Shavahn’s. We burst out in the high-pitched screams that come with surprise celebrations, with exciting news, and we hugged each other deeply, though all for different reasons, I suspect. We left Shavahn’s and made a final comment to the waiter as we exited. We lingered at our cars for several minutes, talking about nothing, and hugged again and said goodbye again and exited again.

I’m sure Ena knew about all our goodbyes and exits, had measured them with that protractor, felt the notches and degrees of the future. A notch to know that Itsuki would run away just like she did, desert his wife and his friends without leaving as much as a note. A notch to know when Suzanna will call me next, or if she ever will again, or if she’ll just ask that I babysit for a weekend and offer up concert tickets as payment. A notch to tell me that it’s okay to fill my quiet house in Philadelphia with the memories of our trip, that even when I take the tickets, it’s okay to not go to the concerts. A notch that tells me, yes, we’re still there, somewhere on that circle, three hundred and sixty degrees away, running through the snow in Sarajevo as we laugh and light cigarettes on our way back home.

Ground to Land On

The chair creaked under Gideon as he got in place in front of the vanity. Hannah pulled down a smock and wrapped it around his neck. It draped flatly over the suit and the dry-cleaned slacks, over the costume he inhabited to channel small-town paranormal detective Dorian Pope. He shifted so that the fabric of the slacks didn't rub against his leg hair, as Dorian wouldn't want it to either. This was one fact among many that never made it into a single episode, even despite Gideon's best pitches to the writer's room. Instead, the ideas sat, growing stale and moldy like bread in daylight, in a hundred notebooks in the little filing cabinet he kept by the bedside. Not one quip, not one phrase, had ever made it in.

Hannah brushed the hair off Gideon's forehead, the stray blonde curls, the frizz, and started on his eyebrows. They were already dark, pitch-black even, but they had to be fuller, more sullen. They had to match Dorian's eyebags, which were much darker than Gideon's own. And those had to match the cheek lines she'd draw on later, and the jaw shadow she'd paint along them afterward. Fake shadows on fake lines.

Someone knocked on the door and Hannah twitched a black line of Persephone's Classic Brow Enhancer across Gideon's forehead.

He leaned his head back. "Who is it?"

"It's me," Manny said.

"Oh, come in."

The door swung open, nearly knocking into Gideon's chair. Manny squeezed inside, being careful not to breathe the wrong direction, and shut the door. It was a little box of a thing, the makeup room, but it had been in worse places. Season one, it was a tiny trailer that they parked out in front of the soundstage. Hannah wasn't around then. Manny was, but she was just an unpaid intern. Season two came and went and they got a couple People's Choice Awards and the makeup trailer became a makeup room and Manny became a *paid* intern.

And then season three came and went, sans awards. That was only a few months ago. Now, they were nearly through season four, with a couple episodes released, and the makeup room had been relegated to the back broom closet of the production office building.

"What's up, Manny?"

She cleared her throat. "Adam wants to talk to you."

"Why?" he asked.

"He didn't say."

Gideon nodded and turned back to the mirror. Hannah cleaned off the smudge and reapplied some filler. The contour tools came out.

"He'll have to wait, you know."

"I know," She said.

"Did you—"

"Tell him it'd have to wait until after the shoot?"

He smiled at her in the mirror, this short woman from Chicago who'd left school to pursue this thing they were doing, this acting, art-ing thing. She was all curls and frizz, just like him, except she was a foot shorter and much darker and deeper everywhere. She carouseled a rotation of polos, red, green, blue, always paired with baggy khakis. Today's choice was light brown khakis, light yellow polo. She was grinning back.

"How'd he take it?"

She shrugged. "He didn't say anything. Just picked up his phone."

"Well, whatever," he said. "Anything else?"

"We have a half day. For some reason."

"I'm the reason," Gideon added quickly.

Hannah stopped defining Dorian's jaw and looked down. Gideon looked up at her through his curls, the whites of eyes showing.

"I've got dinner with Suzanna," he said flatly.

Gideon watched a smile creep up on Manny's face, a different one, more childlike, before she raised the clipboard to her mouth and stopped anyone from seeing it. Hannah held back a laugh but, with how close he was, he could hear it escape out her nose in a static puff.

"Really? How old are we?"

Manny lowered the clipboard. "It's just a lot, is all."

"Am I not allowed to date now?"

"So you're dating?" Hannah asked.

He glared at her. "We're going out for dinner."

"For the sixth time," Manny added.

"Manuela."

She put her hands up. "I'm leaving. Don't forget about Adam."

Manny left the room and the door knocked into Gideon's chair as she shut it again. There was a big splotch of shadow where Dorian's jawline was supposed to be. Hannah swore at the intern, who was no longer in sight, and attended to the mess.

When they were done, Gideon could only be seen in form, in structure. Once he was asked at a panel if he related to Dorian on any level, if he had OCD, too, for example. He didn't, and had never experienced compulsions or obsessions of any kind, he admitted, only half thinking of his affinity for vodka in his twenties and baseball trading cards in his teens. No, not exactly, he'd said, but I'm a hanger, you know, he'd continued, I'm a hook for Dorian to hang on. I'm related to him in the way a coat rack is related to the coat, he'd finished, nodding solidly, signifying the next person to come up to the mic.

He looked at himself in the mirror. That was the premier detective of supernatural events in Harrison Grove, alright. Big eyebrows, dark circles, jawline like a butcher knife.

Hannah closed up the room and Gideon walked to set. It was a five minute traverse to the sound stage. The whole compound, eight buildings in all, laid just outside of Boston, half an hour from Gideon's apartment. The first season filmed in Los Angeles, and when that did well, the studio saw it as an opportunity to build some market in Hollywood East. So Gideon moved, the show moved, and everything became more pines than palms, more lobster rolls than lobster scampi. But it might've been better that way. Harrison Grove was vaguely New English, and actually being in New England cemented the feeling in Gideon's head.

Sound stage 7 appeared in view. The marker by the door had the interchangeable plastic sign that read out whoever was filming. Today's said *Pope* in that choppy white font, the mysterious purple smoke swirling around it. Underneath it read the episode title, "Big Girls Don't Die." Gideon slapped the sign as he went in.

They finished the scene in three takes, because that's the way Gideon was.

It would've only taken two takes, but halfway through the second Gideon noticed Adam standing among the gaggle of PAs that had crowded around the camera. The scruffy showrunner stuck out like a sore thumb in the crowd of dewy-eyed twenty-somethings. Gideon bid goodbye to Gloria, who insisted again he'd had to watch reruns of her show on Netflix, and walked toward the door, toward the rest of the crew. He passed Adam without saying a word. Gideon could hear footsteps right behind his.

"Can I help you?" He asked, moving to the door.

"We need to talk."

Gideon nodded. "Manny told me, thank you."

"I really think it'd be better—"

"Didn't Manny tell you it'd have to wait 'til end of day?"

"Yeah—"

"Okay, well you should listen to her. I've got other scenes to shoot."

"No, you don't."

Gideon stopped and turned around. "What?"

"We need to talk, I told you."

"You moved my scenes?" He asked.

"It's two scenes."

"It's not," Gideon huffed. "I follow a very particular schedule, and it's important that you maintain it. Don't fuck with my scenes, and certainly don't do it without telling me."

He had his finger in Adam's face, but Adam just cocked his head to one side.

"You ready to listen?"

Gideon looked out across the warehouse. Gloria was doding around the set with several of the PAs, picking up props, fake plates and fine glasses. They wandered around the place like it was a museum.

"What else have I got to do?"

Gideon pushed out the door and Adam followed. The sound stage, which rose behind them in great steel panels, had a curtain of garden beds along the outside with flowers and bushes, to simulate that California could exist this far north, Gideon guessed. He sat down on one of the stone dividers. Adam kept standing. The sun shone down on them both.

"What?" Gideon asked.

"Could we go somewhere else?"

"Sit down," he said. "Seriously."

"No, I'm serious. I think we should go somewhere else," Adam insisted.

"It's fine. Sit and tell me what you have to tell me."

"Gideon—"

"*Adam*."

He put his hands in his pockets. "We're cancelled."

A breeze moved through the garden beds and rustled some petals loose from their buds. The door to the sound stage opened. Gloria Wells passed by and a couple PAs came out after, following her like desperate roadies. They walked across the lot and disappeared behind another building. A couple of golf carts came through the studio gates and the gates shut with a metal clang behind them.

"What?" Gideon asked.

"We're cancelled. Canned."

"What?" He asked again.

"We get this season to finish, but we're done."

"What the hell happened?"

"Gideon, come on. I'm not in the mood to pretend."

"I'm not," he stammered. "I'm not pretending. What happened?"

Adam sat down, finally. "We are no longer a viable asset."

"Oh, come on, that's…"

Adam was looking at him with these small eyes, skeptical ones. He looked back widely. He wanted to say *Oh, come on, that's ridiculous*, but he didn't. He just let the words hang in the air. That's…. that's….

"It's the streaming services," he said. "That's my opinion."

Gideon nodded. "It's gutting everything."

"They're just doing it better than we are."

"What the hell are we gonna' do?"

Adam shrugged. "We finish the season. Call our agents. What else is there to do?"

He stood up from the garden bed and brushed his hands off. The sun outlined his silhouette so it was almost completely dark to Gideon. The man was as thin, as broad, as spangly as a tree. A little tuft of leaves on top.

"That's it?"

"What do you want me to do? Call up Krohner? Oh, Mr. Krohner sir, you don't understand. This is a show we believe in, sir."

Gideon huffed. "That's not fair."

"I'm eyeing that *Law and Order* spinoff. If I get it, I might be able to secure a spot. Maybe even a regular."

"I don't want to be on fucking *Law and Order*."

"But you wanna' be on something, don't you?"

Gideon just looked up at him. It was one of those clean, crisp days, sun shining, wind blowing, cold on the neck, warm on the face. It reminded him of the fall he'd spent in Manhattan, and how Central Park looked like a crochet square from the highrise. Adam kicked his heel into the concrete and clicked his tongue.

"I've gotta' go make some calls," he said. "Go home. You should, too."

"You can't, we can't just, give in."

Adam sighed. "Go home, Gideon. Call your agent."

He walked away, out of his angelic outline and into his profile. Gideon could see the sleek jawline, the stubble that he'd left hanging on his face for just long enough. He admired that about Adam, his sense of timing. He was the first person on the show, before Gideon. It was Adam and Lawrence Krohner and a couple of studio reps. Big room, a casting tape. He read with Nina Faruki, who went on to play Dorian's love interest in seasons one and two. She was killed off in the season two finale. Gideon sat at the edge of the garden bed and thought about how they'd never filmed the scene he shot for. It was some one-off argument between Dorian and Alice, Nina's character. Something about Dorian's job being too dangerous. Gideon had suggested he and Nina roleplay the two once, while they were tearing each other's clothes off in the makeup trailer on break. She had denied the request.

He got up from the stone and brushed his hands off and started toward the office building and the makeup room and the bag of stuff he had brought with him for the day, which was really a half day, which was really just one half-hour scene.

Hannah wasn't around, and neither was Manny. He passed by some of the production offices but didn't say anything to anyone. The announcement would come officially some time that afternoon. That's what the half day was for. Not just his dinner with Suzanna. Fuck. His dinner with Suzanna. He walked toward the parking lot and tugged his phone out from the side pouch on his backpack. She had texted three times, twice to detail an interaction she'd had with a fencing student's overbearing mother, and one asking if their plans were still on. He put the phone in his back pocket while he climbed into his car and pulled it back out once inside. *Yes! Does 7 still work?*, he replied.

The drive to his apartment took him by the harbor and the basin. There were a hundred ships in the docks, little dinghies, bigger sailboats. Ahead, off the pier, were the cargo holds, the big wavebreakers that carried cars and phones and sweatshop t-shirts in big metal boxes across the Atlantic. The highway dipped down near a private marina and Gideon saw an older man tying up his yacht to one of those wishbone-shaped posts. He imagined doing the same, tugging that big cord of rope around the nub, whipping it in that way skilled fisherman do to get it taught. He felt his ankle get caught in the imaginary move, in the quick flick of nylon. The yacht would buckle back into the water and he'd get pulled down into the cold, cold bay. It'd sting his skin and fill his nose and the more he kicked, the more the rope would wound around his leg like a spider cocooning prey.

The highway curved away from the bay and the docks, across a couple bridges, and Gideon pulled off the exit to his apartment building.

He parked the car behind the complex and went inside. No sight of the doorman. The elevator took him up to the fifth floor and his feet took him the rest of the way. The apartment

opened up in front of him. The living room, the little couch, the TV set, the adjoining kitchen, little dining space. A bedroom, a bathroom. The balcony that overlooked Boston's innards. It was a small place, but, this afternoon, it felt infinitely small, tiny, unobservable, atomic. He threw his bag down next to the coffee table and slouched into the couch, as if it would swallow him up and no one, not even the paint on the walls, could see him again. He reached over and pulled out the drawer in the side table. A couple quarters, a stray nail or two. He felt around until a half-burnt joint rolled into his fingers. It was a paltry thing, somewhat frayed at the edges, but it was what he had. He lit up and turned on the TV.

The scroll of the cable listings stared at him blankly, blue, pinned down against the screen like etchings in stone. He flipped through and flipped through and flipped through until he had passed through every network and still not found anything. The joint embered in his hand. A red-black mote fell to the couch and he knocked it away. It burnt a small black smudge into the carpet. He stamped his foot on the spot, slamming his weight against the floor, again, and again. The black smudge didn't move, didn't budge, didn't feather out into dust as he wished. It was burnt right into the carpet. He'd have to deal with it. The TV auto-selected whatever show he'd randomly landed on. The nasally voice of some bullshit daytime sell-out actor rang out in the apartment, into his eardrums. Gideon picked up the remote and threw it at the screen.

The TV wobbled slightly before it settled again. The remote clattered to the floor, near the edge of the coffee table. He put out the joint against the glass of its surface and let it sit. Whatever was on the screen was staying on. He went out to the patio and laid down in one of the lawnchairs he'd been given when he moved in years ago. Midday rolled over Boston, and Gideon watched.

He woke up to the sound of his phone ringing in his pocket. The caller ID flashed on the screen in big white text, *Olivia Garrett*. His agent. He let it ring. It went to voicemail, and

his wallpaper and time and date came back up. It was a quarter past fucking five. It took half an hour or more to get ready, to really get ready. Half hour to get Suzanna. Budget twenty minutes to the restaurant. Gideon felt the high dissipate all at once as he leapt up out of the chair and started his routine.

He had heard once back that cold showers were better for the environment so had made himself accustomed to them. It took him ten minutes to scrub like he liked, to shampoo his hair to the fullest extent, to condition it properly. Five minutes of drying time. He'd set out all the appropriate after-shower products on the rim of the sink beforehand, so that when he stepped out of the tub, towel wrapped around his waist, it was all there, waiting for him. Some hair paste while the hair was still damp. Deodorant once the armpits were dry. If it was a special occasion, he'd clean up his hairline and shave off the hairs on his upper lip. He debated whether it mattered or not for a few minutes before taking the razor to his face and clipping off the fly-aways that had amassed along his forehead.

He set out a couple pairs of slacks, one black, the other brown. He chose the brown, paired it with a mustard yellow button up, and threw on a beige suit coat. Earth tones. It looked like he'd rolled around in the dirt. He'd read somewhere once that it was a good look for blondes, for fairer-toned blondes at that.

Suzanna lived in one of the rich suburbs off the highway, off the bay, where the metro mess Gideon had grown to love faded into houses with lawns and gardens and faux pillars. He didn't know who was trying to resurrect the Roman Empire in the suburbs of America, but whoever it was knew what they were doing. Driving through the area, every house had at least two pillars to curtain their front doors. Some even had larger front patios off the pillars, and some still had railings. All had nicely trimmed bushes and political signs. They all seemed to be the same, which was no surprise. Suzanna's place was a duplex, or at least had been at one point, so there were two front doors, but she was the only who lived there, and

used half the house to give fencing lessons. She also had a studio at one of the local colleges, and she was working on opening one downtown, but that's all Gideon knew.

He texted her that he'd arrived and she came out immediately. *We should've coordinated.* She was all red and crimson and dark, deep, sultry. The brown of her hair, which fell around her shoulders in waves, seemed to reflect a kind of redness, even. It bounced around her head as she walked down the drive and made her way into the car. She kissed him and told him she looked like the outfit. *We look like mustard and ketchup*, he thought. "Fly" by Sugar Ray came on as they left the neighborhood and with the wind whipping around the car and the lights of the city, the song's smooth, rocking bass felt natural. He turned it up.

"You like Sugar Ray?" Suzanna asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know, really."

"They're like that, yeah. Oh, thank you again for the reservations."

He nodded. "Of course. I'm happy to, always."

"I've never had Mongolian food, you know. What's it like?"

Gideon had a roommate in college, for the three semesters he stayed in college, from Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, a small landlocked country next to Kazakhstan, which was a large landlocked country that technically didn't border Mongolia but did in spirit. The roommate ate a lot of pulled noodles and stir-fried beef and vegetables. It always smelled good. Gideon guessed it'd be a lot like that.

"I'm not sure," he said. "It's supposed to be good."

The restaurant was called *Mongolian Kitchen*, and the words flashed in all capitals on the front of the large hut-like structure. It sat on the edge of a hill, slightly looking over the rest of the area. The parking lot laid around it. Nearly every spot was full, and, after they found parked and went inside, the interior told the same story. It was packed. Families, couples, stray groups of friends. They were like sardines, shoulder to shoulder in the waiting

area. Deeper in the restaurant, circular grills dotted the space, surrounded by circle tables and a round of chairs. There were five in sight, but more elsewhere, Gideon figured. It was one of those places where they made the food right in front of you.

"Oh shit, Gideon. They make the food right in front of you."

She pointed to one of the chefs, one of the tall white-smocked guys standing at his grill, as he turned over a heap of sizzling noodles and mixed in a pan of sauce into a nearby slab of beef. The family sitting around the table clapped as flames licked up between the cracks of the meat and nearly burnt the chef's hand. One of the kids had a birthday hat on, one of those awful plastic ones with the elastic straps that always snaps off and hits you.

"Cool, right?"

Her grip on his arm lessened. He felt the release and looked over.

"What?"

"You're a man of few words, but never this few."

He laughed. "It was just a long day."

"Oh, really? Set days always leave you in… a good mood."

She meant sex, he knew. There had been several times, after the first and second dates, when he still dreamt about sleeping with her, that'd he text her on a break, see where she was, meet halfway, and fuck in the parking lot of a Denny's. It made him feel like he was sixteen again and sneaking around with his physics teacher's daughter.

"Not today, I guess."

"Oh," she said, grabbing on again. "Did something happen?"

"Just one of those days, ya' know?"

He huffed to punctuate the statement, as if the puff of air would make it more convincing. She laughed and held on even tighter.

"All my days are very simple and easy, actually."

"Oh really?"

"Oh yeah," she said. "Put together as a puzzle."

"Mm."

"Post-puzzle, of course."

"Right, right."

Some thirty-something at the front of the waiting area called out for Hatch, party of two, and Suzanna and Gideon followed her to a table near the side of the restaurant. There was a young couple already seated, opposite them, across the wide brim of the circular table. The chef introduced himself as Derek and passed around a menu. Gideon felt his pocket buzzing. *Olivia Garrett*, the screen read. He let it go to voicemail again. A text appeared a second later: *Call me.* He clicked his phone back to black. When everyone had decided on food, Derek, the not-Mongolian Mongolian chef, got to work. Dry rice came out, packs of noodles, hunks of uncooked beef and mutton. It was as Gideon expected.

"What ever happened with that student's mother?"

Suzanna rolled her eyes, sipping a cocktail. "She simply didn't understand why missing two lessons in a row was such a big deal."

"Yeesh."

"You're telling me. We had this whole dialogue about time and energy. Well, you know, time's a figment of human imagination, she says. Yeah, sure, but I've still got to get to bed at some time, right? She's not even new age. She's new age for hire. It's so fake."

Gideon watched the rice brown on the grill. "Did you remove her from the roster?"

"No, no," she said. "The kid's too good. Mom'll have to do a lot more than that to get me to let go of him. He's as good at eighteen as I was at twenty."

Gideon took a drink.

"Oh, no, I didn't mean like, oh wow I was so good, I—"

He shook his head. “Suzanna, you don’t need to. I know you were good. It’s fine.”

She smiled.

He felt his phone again. It was Olivia again. He let it go to voicemail and shoved it back in his pocket again.

“Is something going on?” Suzanna asked.

Derek flipped a tray of cut vegetables onto the grill. Onions, garlic, carrots, sprouts of all kinds sizzled together in the sauce that had begun to pervade the hot surface.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s the third time you’ve checked your phone tonight,” she said. “Once when we were waiting, and twice here, while we’ve been seated.”

“It’s just work stuff.”

“What work stuff?”

“I told you it was a weird day.”

“No, you said it was a long day. How was it weird?”

The phone buzzed again.

“Fuck,” he said. “I’ve gotta’ take this.”

Gideon got up from his seat and left Suzanna with Derek and the couple and the fried noodles and rice and sheep. *Olivia Garrett* flashed across his screen for the fourth time, but this time, he slid the button green and answered.

“Gideon?”

“Olivia?”

“What in the fresh hell do you think you’re doing?”

He looked back at Suzanna. “I’m on a date.”

“Well, it’s the fifth time I’ve called, so you’ve had ample opportunity to avoid this outcome, you know.”

"Sure."

"When I call, it's important, right? If I wanted to catch up, I'd call my therapist and see if she wants drinks. You should answer, right?" She asked.

"Sure, Olivia."

"Good, well," she murmured. "What're you doing this weekend?"

"Shooting, probably."

"Not Saturday afternoon. I've got you a meeting for a new hospital drama on Fox. I'm not saying you'll get a main spot, but some side character maybe."

Gideon sighed. "I don't want to play a doctor."

"Well, there's an audition for a part in *Brother John*. Small town pastor that moonlights as an assassin for the CIA. I've got that lined up."

"Come on."

"Beggars can't be choosers. There's an ET meets The Office kind of thing, you'll—"

"I'm not begging."

"No, of course not. *Brother John* and the Roswell thing will be Monday. I can call Adam right when we get off."

"Olivia, I'm not playing a pastor or a doctor or whatever."

"You wouldn't be the pastor, Gideon. It's his handler, which is something."

He paused. "Alright. I'll let you know."

"Uh, let me know what?"

"If I'm going."

He could hear her put the phone to her clavicle, the way she's done around him when she's annoyed with clients and needs a second.

"Gideon, I understand you're upset. Hell, I'm upset. But we've got to be quick."

"I don't want to," he said. "I want to take a break."

"A break?"

"Yeah. A break."

"You. Okay. You are thirty-five years old. You are the lead on a network drama. This isn't Netflix, it's not *House of Cards*. You landed a golden goose. And it was a good fucking goose, but it's time to jump off. We've gotta' find ground to land on here."

He and Oliva had sparred before. He knew what her next move was. She was being a good agent, a good friend. Be rough upfront, appeal to the sensitivities, return to the roughness when the gentle approach doesn't work. She hadn't wanted him to audition for *Pope*, initially. There was an audition he'd been lucky enough to nab at the last second for a Star Trek spinoff series. It was going to be his big break, playing some android. He'd lied to Olivia and told her he was going to the Star Trek audition when, in reality, he drove twenty minutes out of the way to read a part for a little show that no one was talking about. It had worked out, at least for a few years.

"Gideon?"

Her voice filled his ear. "I'll let you know."

"Let me know you're going? Great, sounds great.

"I'll let you know *if* I'm going, thanks."

She sighed. "It's not an *if* kind of thing. This is sink or swim."

"I'm going back to my date now."

He hung up and shoved the phone back in his pocket. Suzanna was turned around, but he could pinpoint her exactly. They'd met at a similar place, a bar downtown that he and Adam frequented when they were feeling chummy. She had the same look then that she did now. A head of hair that big is hard to miss. The dress fit her in more ways than one. They did look like mustard and ketchup, but that fit, too. There was a joke in his head about condiments and condoms but he couldn't quite put the two together.

"Everything okay?" she asked as he rejoined the table.

Derek was giving out plates already. He'd missed whatever show he was there to see.

"Yeah, just, just work stuff. Olivia had to talk about something."

She forked a piece of grilled mutton. "Are we just rolling with that?"

"What?"

"Are we just rolling with that?" she asked, chewing. "Is this what you want me to believe? We've fucked, Gideon Hatch. I know you. But I'll pretend if you want to."

He laughed. "I'm not pretending, but thank you. That's very sweet."

"Cool, so just rolling with it. Got it."

"We're not rolling with anything, unless you want to later."

He thought about the joints he had laying loose in the side coffee table. He'd bothered to put it away in a drawer if he was ten years younger, but anyone he'd have over now would want easy access to the weed anyway, including himself, which was the more important fact.

"I can't, thank you though."

"Why not?"

"I've got that interview," she said. "They're very serious about drugs."

"New England You—"

"New England Youth Fencing Initiative," she finished.

"It's for the summer, right?"

"Mhm. May through July."

"That's a lot of fucking time," he said.

She shrugged. "It's worth the money."

"Will you still do studio stuff?"

"If I can manage it."

He felt his phone buzz in his pocket. Hanging up on Olivia might've been a bad idea, but this was nuts. He clicked the silence button on the side and the vibrations stopped.

"She calling again?"

He must've made a face.

"She's persistent," he said.

"Would you please tell me what's going on? I'm not evil. I'm not judgemental. I just want to know you're okay. I don't think that's too much to ask."

The night they called him to tell him he'd landed Dorian's part, Gideon was practicing guitar in an apartment the size of a thimble. He shared it with a roommate, a college friend he barely spoke to now. He was gone, at work. It was just him and the dingy echo of Bob Dylan against the concrete and exposed steel. The phone rang and he put aside the guitar and listened to Oliva tell him that he got the part, that he was going to be Dorian Pope. The principal photography was three weeks out, with other preproduction meetings slated for the days inbetween. He told him about the pay, which was more than he had ever made, and the hours, which was more than he had ever worked. After Olivia hung up, Gideon paced the apartment until his roommate got home and the two yelled their throats dry with joy and then slicked them that evening with enough alcohol to get a whale drunk. He set the guitar in the closet and never touched it again until he gave it away to an ex-girlfriend when he moved out of that cheap, little apartment into the new one, which was still little but not so cheap. He wondered if the ex still played the guitar, or if she had given it up and given it away like he had. From his hands to hers to someone else's, a chain of lines linked by a thread not one of them would ever see. This invisible, unknowable thread.

"I got fired today," he said. "They're cancelling the show."

Suzanna stopped eating. "Oh god, Gideon, Jesus. Holy shit. Are you okay?"

She put down her fork and reached out for a hug and Gideon let her wrap him up. His curls met her waves and both faces became enshrouded in a sandy viel. He could see through the hair to the restaurant behind her, to the middle-aged husband and wife sitting across from them that were staring at their embrace. Suzanna let go. Gideon felt his phone buzz again.

"This woman is fucking petulant," he said, clicking it off again.

"Olivia?"

He nodded. "Persistent is putting it lightly."

"How can they just fire you? In the middle of shooting?"

"Well, it's not like," he started. "We get to finish the season, basically. But that's it."

"Has anyone planned for this?"

Gideon rubbed his hands against his slacks. "Don't think so."

"Well that's fine," she said, obviously feigning confidence. "You all have a good writer's room. It won't be easy, but you could tie it up nice."

"Yeah, I think, uh, I think we'll be fine."

Suzanna eyed him. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Oh yeah, it's Hollywood. Hollywood East I mean. It happens, right?"

"Yeah, right. Right."

Gideon moved back to their plates, to the noodles and grilled meat and sauteéd carrots and mushrooms. Suzanna put an arm on his shoulder, rubbing it gently with the broad of her thumb. He felt his phone buzz.

"Oh my fucking god. I'm gonna' murder my agent."

Gideon pulled out his phone. It did not say *Olivia Garrett* in those clinical white letters, as he was expecting. Instead, across the top of the screen, it simply read *Manny (PA).*

"Shit, oh I, I have to take this, Suzanna."

He stood and she smiled up at him. "Go, go, it's fine. I'll be here."

He walked away from the table slightly, to the same spot he'd been in before, but a new chef was there with a new family and the noise of the tongs hitting the table felt like nails on a chalkboard. The sizzling overpowered his senses. The smell. He made a motion to Suzanna to show her he was going out of the restaurant and moved through the lobby, through the straggling dinner crowd, outside. He slid the call button until it was green.

"Manny, hi," he panted.

She sniffled on the other side. "This is so awful."

A couple came out behind him and he realized he was standing in front of the doors. He asked Manny to hold on a second so he could find a better spot. There was a green bench on the side of the restaurant, a little area in front of the bushes that lined the entrance. It was slightly elevated above the parking lot and the highway that stretched out beyond it.

"You there?"

"It's horrible," she said, sniffling again.

"I know," he said. "I know it is. I'm really sorry."

"It's not your fault. Is it?"

"I don't—"

"Sorry, that's an awful question. I don't mean it's your fault. I don't think it is. Did Adam do this?"

He shook his head, though she couldn't see him. "No, no. Higher than him I think."

"Still awful. What're we doing now? What's the point?"

She started crying harder. Gideon could feel his chest tightening, the muscles sticking to his ribs like glue.

"Adam's gonna' do this *Law and Order* spin off, Manny. It sounds pretty good. They'll need PAs, of course, but you have a lot of experience now and he knows you. You could land a coordinator job. Would you like that?"

She cleared up. “Is that really possible?”

“I think so. I really think so. I’ll write you a letter, or call him, or whatever’s needed.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “I appreciate it.”

“And we’ll finish out the season, and that’ll be good too right?”

“Right. I just hope we find out if Ellie is a vampire.”

He laughed. “I’ll mention it to the writers. They’ll clear it up.”

Manny blew her nose in a wad of tissues. He could feel the small puffs of air coming out from the cracks in the kleenexes as it travelled down the cord and into his phone.

“Listen, I’m on this dinner with Suzanna—”

“Oh shit, sorry Gideon. I’ll go. Thank you for—”

“No, no, you’re fine. I just,” he started. “I wanna’ know what you think of her.”

She laughed, like she was surprised. “What I think of her?”

“Yeah, do you like her?”

“Ya’ know, I don’t really know her, but, uh, yeah, she seems to make you happy, which is a big thing, and I’ve, uhm, never known you to do a fancy dinner date, no offense.”

He smiled. “No, none taken. Not at all.”

“Do you like her?”

He thought about it for a moment. He thought about their hair cocoon.

“I think so,” he said. “I think I’m gonna ask her to go on a picnic with me Saturday.”

“Aren’t we shooting then?”

“In the morning, yeah. I’m thinking about the afternoon.”

She sniffled. “That sounds nice.”

“I agree. Well, I’m gonna’ get off here, but we’ll be fine alright?”

“Oh yeah, of course. Get to your date.”

He swallowed. “We’ll be fine, you know.”

"I know, yeah. Thank you, for everything."

He nodded. "I'll see you soon, Manny."

The muted dial tone rang out and the phone went dead in his hands. Gideon slipped it back into his pocket. The wind blew through the bushes behind him.

Ahead, the congested vein of the highway stretched clear across the city, slinking flat and invisible along the edge of the bay. The blue haze of evening fell over the asphalt and the lampposts and the tic-tac boxes that lined the sidewalks. Music lifted from a hundred open car windows, stirring sonic fog above the traffic as Jeeps and SUVs and little Beetles bled red into the past and screamed white into the future. Somewhere out there he felt another him, another Gideon, tapping a hand-drum solo on the worn rubber of a steering wheel on his way to perform at a jazz club, since he had never gotten that job on that *Pope* show and so had never been too busy to practice guitar and never too bad to give up on it, and instead of days in conference rooms and studios rehearsing lines, he works the day shift at a bank or a grocery store that allows him to play on the weekends in dimly-light bars and dives in those crevices of the city that no one but musicians can find. Maybe that's where the other Suzanna is, an attractive silhouette in all that smoke, beckoning him like a buoy in the dark water. They'd slam pillows against a brick wall just to watch the feathers explode in a thousand directions, throw heirloom glasses at the kitchen door just to see the crystals fly, unspool yarn from the roof just to watch the threads spiral down, just to stand together on the edge of the railing and listen to the unmissable sound of flesh hitting pavement.

Eureka Station

The whispers led Itsuki to a little town in Nunavut. The snowmobile that had taken him there, and the driver, a parka-swaddled man named Sherry, disappeared over the ridge in a flurry of silt and snow. An assembly of cabins roosted together on the other side of the hill, crowded along a single frost-choked path. Overhead, power cables climbed from smokestack to smokestack, swinging in the wind like vines turned loose from a jungle tree. He followed the wires from house to house, to the two diesel engines humming, almost silently, at the bottom of the slope, shaking ice loose from their buttons and dials. Beyond them, the ridge bottomed out into the tundra, to the whited stone and dirt and unseen clay, before falling into the channel and the sea and the many pallid islands that jigsawed this region of the Arctic. There, across the glacial mosaic of the water, the muted antennas of the research station punctured the horizon. It was only reachable by helicopter, and it's where Itsuki was headed.

He shuffled down the path, the snow resisting his every step like concrete. There was an unnatural force to it, a push back, as if the ground itself could unmoor from Newton's laws at any moment and tip the scales against gravity. Itsuki imagined the very stones and ice chunks of the hillside floating delicately in the air like flakes in a snowglobe. His foot slipped on a stone and the strap of his satchel dug into his shoulder and sent his fantasy tumbling back to physics and pressure and weight. As he walked, the bag bumped against his waist, against the cloth he had tied there to keep his coat tucked into his pants. The satchel had been a random purchase on a random day many years ago, but here he was with it, in the remote, white world, far from its home in a New England Macy's.

He'd filled it with innumerable items over the two and a half decades he'd had it, but never had it been so crowded. It was burdened with binders of interview notes, newspaper clippings, Ecuadorian stamps, letter transcriptions, moss samplings, genetic test results, and more than enough research on Baird's Tapir. Among the folders, and compromising most of

the bag's weight, were several first edition novels by Vito Delgado Sacristán. *El hijo no es suficiente*, *Cuidado con la tortuga*, *Sueños de Madrid*, they were all there, leatherbound, notated, cat-eared, bookmarked, and coffee-stained.

Books aren't collectibles, Itsuki thought, they're meant to be used.

The town and its cabins suddenly appeared around him. Icicles clung to the roofs, to the acute edges, awning the doors and windows. The curtains were drawn at every house, but, still, a warm and yellow light bled through them and blanketed the hill in an incandescent glow. It washed over Itsuki as he made his way to a clearing in the middle of the hill and the large, two-story cabin that sat in front of it. Against the near wall, the reins of a trio of dog sleds whipped and sung in the wind. The door of the house came into view, a large, wooden hatch, and the small sign spinning round and round above it. The wind slowed, and the card of flimsy plastic rested. Itsuki pulled the hood of his parka loose, cleared the frost off his glasses, but still could not make out what it said. It had been sun-bleached for far too long and not a letter was readable. Only strange, incoherent runes remained.

He climbed the two steps that preceded the door, knocked the snow off his boots, and pushed against the wood until it unlodged from the frame. It swung away from Itsuki's hand, accelerating out of reach until it landed with a thud against the left wall. A bell on the desk ahead rang. A pair of oars hanging on the wall rattled in their hooks. A bobblehead tumbled off the far mantle, behind the desk, and rolled downhill, until Itsuki could see it again. He thought it looked like a TV character he knew, but he couldn't place it. The house rocked suddenly with heavy footsteps, swinging side to side like a boat at sea. Itsuki straightened his satchel, stepped inside, shut the door.

A head poked out from a doorway at the far end of the room.

"Puis-je vous aider?" he asked.

The man had a stout, round head, and it reminded Itsuki of the gnomes that sat in the garden beds outside Wheeler Hall in the spring and summer. He was young, younger than Itsuki, but had only a small brown rug of hair on his head, which was cut haphazardly into bangs at the front, thick choppy pieces that hung over his forehead like the tear-off tabs of a missing cat poster. A mustache, which was much nicer and much fuller, obscured his lips so that when he spoke, it looked like the comb of fine hair was doing the talking.

"Puis-je vous aider?" he asked again.

"Pardon?"

The man walked out of the doorway and into half-view behind the desk. The height of his head made him look very tall, but it must've been the illusion of an unseen stairwell, because he was quite short. A pair of sleek, orange-and-white striped pajamas clung to his frame, the shirt's buttons gleaming in the lamplight. The image of happy gnomes sticking out among lilacs and daffodils came to mind again. Itsuki tried not to dwell on the picture, less the man asked why he kept imagining a bright red dunce hat on him.

"Sorry," he said, leaning on the counter. "I figured you were French."

Itsuki laughed. "Oh, no, I'm not French."

"French Canadian?"

"No, no. I'm from Philadelphia."

The man rubbed his mustache. "Do you *speak* French?"

"Not really. Aunque hablo español. Nihon."

"Huh." He said, shaking his head. "You seem French. Napoléon dans une autre vie."

"What?"

"Nothing. No hablo español, I'm afraid. English will do." He smiled, clasping hand over hand at the desk like a concierge. "Can I help you? Are you delivering from Grise?"

Itsuki walked toward the desk. "I'm sorry, I don't understand."

“Grise Fiord. Aujuittuq. If you all could keep a driver more than two weeks, it’d make things a whole lot smoother. When Wally was handling supplies, we had Qimmiq and they never gave us trouble, dieu repose leur âme.”

“I’m sorry, I, I don’t know what Grise is. I honestly have no idea what you’re talking about. I’m—”

He smacked his hand on the desk. “Even if you were, you’d still be two days late.”

The room shook again. Itsuki got a good look around as the whole place wobbled. It was certainly the town center, maybe even a town hall, though it looked more like a hotel than anything else. A tall desk stood between him and the man, papers and trinkets blanketing its counter. Black and white photos plastered the left wall. Burly men held big fish in each and every one, and several were adorned with medals. A small side table sat below the oars. It looked like it had once been nice, dressed in lace linen, but now it was covered in dust and cobwebs, and the sheet was yellow. A half-melted candle sat in a little dish in its center. A large map of Ellesmere Island covered the right wall. There were scribblings in a language Itsuki did not know, and several thumbtacks denoting other things he did not know. Towns, he guessed. There were only four or five in all.

“Who are you, then?” the man asked.

Itsuki slipped off a glove and offered his hand. “My name’s Itsuki Yashima. I’m trying to get to Eureka Station. I understand there’s a helicopter.”

The man’s hand was warm and doughy in Itsuki’s, a relief to the brittle cold that had swallowed his fingers and robbed them of their color. He took off his other glove and rubbed his hands together in the hopes they would crack like glow sticks and be warm again. The man held his arms against his chest and eyed him. The mustache seemed to look, too.

“I’m Tai,” he said, smiling slightly. “Taima, really, but it’s Tai. We don’t have a helicopter, you know.”

Itsuki stopped rubbing his hands. “What do you mean?”

“We haven’t had a helicopter for years. They abandoned the station and sent the helicopter back to Resolute. More useful there, I guess. What do you need to go there for?”

Itsuki didn’t know it was abandoned. The realization wiggled its way into the crevices of his snow pants, the creases of his parka, like the warmth of the cabin. He knew that the last couple decades had made living in these remote regions more dangerous than usual. Storms were more common, but also unpredictable, even to the people that had lived with them for millennia. Whole islands disappeared into the sea. Freighters took advantage of the new channels and crowded them in the summer. He’d seen the pictures, the polar bears paddling against the wake of passing cargo ships, the walrus heads on the snowshore. It seemed to him that if there was a time to man and maintain a climate research station, it would be now, in the upward arc of whatever apocalypse was unfolding. The wine-colored bruises along his shoulders seared with strange heat. He felt the skin around his ankles tighten.

“I’m looking for someone,” Itsuki said. “Are you sure there’s not a helicopter?”

“Did *you* see a helicopter outside?”

He hadn’t, no. But he hadn’t seen any dogs either, and yet, there were still dog sleds sitting outside near the front door, discarded, forgotten, making music out of the wind as it whistled through their blades and handrails.

“Is there a boat?”

Tai laughed. “Boat’s a generous word. What the hell do you want with Eureka? I’m serious. There’s nothing out there. No one.”

Itsuki wiped his palms on the slick face of his snow pants. It was freezing a moment ago, and still *was* magnitudes below zero just behind the door, but now, it was warm, rising to an unbearably swelter, and he could feel sweat beading up along his nape, where the fur of

the hood scratched against his skin. He began unbuttoning his coat, but Tai's eyes seemed to follow his hands as they fiddled with the plastic rivets, so he stopped.

Tai moved around the right end of the desk and picked up the bobblehead that had rolled to the floor in Itsuki's initial commotion. Looking at it again, he was sure, yes, sure that it was some popular character, maybe TV, maybe film, but he still had no better idea on who it was, no firmer grasp. Just absent, hollow familiarity.

"Wally can help you," Tai said, placing the bobblehead back on the mantle.

"The delivery guy?"

He nodded. "Yeah. Used to work at Eureka part-time. I'd take you out there myself, but I don't trust the channel. Too tricky. Anyway, let me get my coat and I'll take you to Wally's place."

Itsuki smiled and the wrinkles around his eyes and cheeks folded. These signs of age never really bothered him. Old people should look old. Tai disappeared through the doorway and stomped up the hidden stairwell. His footsteps wobbled the house again. The ceiling creaked and shuddered so that Itsuki could follow Tai's entire path, into the room, around the bed, to the chair he had thrown his coat on. He imagined Tai coming in after working in the snow, defrosting his mustache by a heater, peeling off layer after layer, throwing the coat onto a wicker chair, a frail creation that had sat in the same corner of the same cabin all of last century, the one before it, and the one before that. When Tai returned to the lobby, Itsuki realized he had been holding his breath the entire time he'd been away.

Tai led them outside and locked the door behind them. He was delicate with it, the way jockeys were with horses. Intentional. They turned from the dog sleds, which were swept with new snow, and started down the hill. The satchel dug into Itsuki's bruises again. There was no good way to wear it, to carry its weight. And nothing in it was expendable. There

wasn't an ounce, even a thumbtack's worth, that he could discard. The snow crunched under his boots. It still seemed like it would send him skyward at any moment.

"How long did Wally work at the station?" Itsuki asked.

Tai slipped his hood off. "Not sure. He's been here longer than anyone still around. He was here in the eighties, I know that at least. Says the nineties were the best we ever had it. How old are you?"

"I'm fifty-five."

"Huh, yeah. He's probably got ten, fifteen years on you."

The creeping sensation from before clawed along his spine. The bruises flushed with warmth. Skin tightened, around the ankles, around his heart. It dawned on Itsuki that Wally very well could be Vito Sacristán.

He was born in Ecuador at the height of the banana boom. Itsuki never found much on his upbringing, only that, per Vito's own description, it was idyllic. Galo Plaza, who was, all things considered, not so bad a president, ruled for most of that period. Itsuki speculated that the consistent power was a reason for Vito's sense of youthful stability. *The president is a stand-in father for the nation; patriots are favorite children*. That line from *Madrid Dreams* added to Itsuki's suspicion. That was Vito's first novel. Published by a long-defunct Brazilian publisher in seventy-six. He was only twenty. And then came *The Son is Not Enough*, which was the magnum opus, in seventy-nine. He was only twenty-three. That was what put him on the map, or, at least, on the radar of artsy socialists with strong opinions about cathedrals and the ethics of the Crucifixion. He got married in eighty-one, published *Beware the Turtle* with Fairre-Morton, an extinct publisher out of San Antonio, in eighty-two, and disappeared off the face of the Earth in eighty-three.

Itsuki felt under his parka for his necklace. The metal chain met his hand. It was impossibly cold, unnerving. Still, he rubbed it between his finger and thumb. It coiled up his

neck in a short knot before he repeated the motion in the opposite direction and it fell slack again behind the waterproof down of his coat.

"Oh," he said, finally. "That's quite old."

Wally's house sat near the bottom of the hill, just diagonal of the engines. It was longer than the rest, but only slightly. The smokestack was a bit taller and sat a bit further back than in the other houses. There was no warmth behind the windows, though. The snow in front of Wally's place was clean and bright and clinical. The rest of the hill was Rockwell and Wyeth. This section was Brugel. This section was hospitalesque.

Tai stepped to the door and hammered it with the side of his fist. The door did move, only ricocheting soft thunder down the hill and across the tundra. Tai knocked again.

"When Wally sleeps," he explained. "He could snore through doomsday."

Itsuki nodded and repositioned the satchel on the groove of his shoulder. The cabin door swung in. There was a pause, an infinite moment hanging in the air, where he felt Vito's unmissable presence in the doorway. The aura of kin, radiating out from the hearth to those that can see it, those that will know the color as it washes over them, sinks into their pores, courses through their blood. Wally filled the endless opening and Itsuki felt a fish go belly-up in the pond of his stomach. And then it sprang alive again. And then it fell dead again.

He was a person to behold, but Itsuki didn't know if he was Vito. It'd been four decades, and some change, since anyone had laid eyes on him. So much changes in a year, let alone forty-five. *We are changing all the time, yet rarely intend to.* From Vito's third, his last, *Beware the Turtle*. Itsuki cleared the stray snow off his glasses and scanned the man in the doorway. Tall, stout, taller and stouter than either he or Tai, the Arctic sun caught him like a chandelier and made him glow. His hands cowered in the pockets of his overalls. Itsuki watched as his thumbs nervously rubbed the denim. A wooly blue sweater stuck out from the

straps. He'd rolled the sleeves up so Itsuki could see that tattoos decorated the entirety of the left arm and that the right was completely clear, unchanged, unadulterated. Grey wisps of hair clung to his scalp. It seemed like a breeze could pass through and finish the job.

Wally smiled down at Tai and said something Itsuki could not understand. He figured it was a greeting. Wally pointed over at him, and Itsuki felt the sinews of his chest tighten like strings pulled across a violin. Tai nodded, chuckled, motioned toward Itsuki, and gave Wally a hug. Wally said something and the two burst out in laughter. Whatever it was, whatever the joke had been, Itsuki wasn't in on it, and it seemed to be a very good one.

Tai patted him on the shoulder as he passed by. "Wally'll take care of you."

He looked back up at the man in the doorway and the way his eyes sparkled green and brown and grey all at once. Strange person for a Brugel painting. Itsuki imagined Wally in the throng, a perfect, round, inviting face in the innumerable horde, the sun itself plucked down from the sky and still just one among many, beige jawbones and wisdom teeth like all the rest. Nothing escaped the crowd, it seemed.

"Care to come in, Mr. Yashima?"

Wally didn't wait for an answer. He turned and went inside without another word. Itsuki looked back up at Tai, who was already halfway back to his cabin, but he did not look back. There were twelve steps from his spot in the yard to the doorway. And, looking at the inside of the cabin, there seemed to be only three or four more than that across the length of the house. It was one story, one room. There was a bed in the far right corner, an old chest at the foot of it, and a rug in front of that. The right side of the room ended in a kitchenette near Itsuki. There was a package of bologna sitting on a dull, green plate on the countertop.

The left side of the room was even sparser. Two, near-empty bookcases lined the wall, split from one another by a small window. At the far end, just sixteen steps away, there was a large electric heater blocking the mouth of the fireplace. It didn't look like it had been used

this century. Two sofa chairs sat in front of it. Wally turned a dial on the heater and fell back with a groan into the chair on the right. He motioned Itsuki over to the left.

The heater murmured beside them. The fragile cold lost its grip on Itsuki. He felt the blood in his veins warming again, flowing again. Behind him, on the bed, he could hear the frost and ice melting off his parka, filling the cabin with a constant, high-pitched dripping. The chain of his necklace warmed, too. He hid it behind his sweater.

Wally sneezed into his elbow. "You're from America, yes?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

He laughed. "I've been once or twice."

The green binder in the satchel at his feet contained everything Itsuki considered the complete biography of Vito's known twenty-seven years. He'd been to America several times by the time he'd disappeared, mostly for conferences, socialist international meetings, and trips to his wife's sister in southern Arizona. That was more than once or twice.

"I'm from Philadelphia. Do you know where that is?"

Wally nodded. "Oh, yes. Near Chicago."

Itsuki remembered that Vito had stayed in Chicago in the summer of seventy-seven to attend a season of seminars he'd agreed to put on with some of his academic friends that ran the local chapter of the Communist Party of America.

"Kinda, yeah."

"Well," he said, tucking hands back into pockets. "Tai said you wanted to go to the station, thought there was still a helicopter."

"Yes, sir."

Wally smiled. "No need for sir, Mr. Yashima. What's in Eureka for you?"

If you aren't him, then Vito, Itsuki thought. He'd imagined the moment, dreamt through it, told two therapists about it. The chopper would land and a gaggle of scientists

would meet him at the helipad and some head director would guide him through the halls, with the static murmur of wires drowning out their idle chat. Echoes of laughter from the cafeteria, of serious considerations in the laboratory. And at the end of it, after corridor and corridor and corridor, Vito would be there, hunched over a console, scribbling out his new masterpiece while scientists next to him added notes and figured out how to stop walrus heads from washing up on the whited beaches. He'd shake Vito's hand, smile and say: *my name is Itsuki Yashima, I'm a professor of literature at Wayne College in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; my mentor gifted me 'The Son is Not Enough' in 1992 and I haven't been able to think about anything else since.*

He thought about reaching his hand out and giving the speech to Wally.

"I've been looking for someone," he said. "An old author."

"Friend of yours?"

Itsuki shook his head. "Not really."

"A fan then? You came here because you're a fan?"

"I'm a researcher."

"Oh? What do you do?"

He had left in the morning of a cool day in March two years ago and not done anything but scour the globe for signs of Vito since. It felt inaccurate to say anything else.

"I'm a professor of literature at a college in Philadelphia."

"Goodness," he started. "Quite prestigious. Should I be calling you *doctor*?"

Yes, he thought. No, he thought.

"Itsuki is fine," he said.

"I still don't understand. You're a researcher, yes? Do you have a team with you? Will they be coming tomorrow?"

Itsuki stretched his neck and rolled the chain of his necklace between two fingers.

"No team, no. It's a solo thing."

"Ah, all the same," Wally grumbled, getting up from his chair. "Do you like tea?"

He nodded. "Sure."

Wally shuffled across the floor in his bunny-eared house slippers. There was no noise in the house as he pulled a kettle down from the cabinet, filled it halfway with water, and began boiling it on the gas stove. Itsuki was sure he'd never encountered such silence.

"Sir, I really need to get to Eureka. Your hospitality is appreciated, honorable. I just. I've been travelling for a very long time, and it's right across the channel."

A smirk spread across Wally's face, all the way up one side, only halfway up the other. A laugh escaped his lips, too, and fell flat against the linoleum of the kitchenette. The kettle trembled behind him.

"You sure are ambitious."

"Is that a compliment?"

"I don't know. Is it?"

Itsuki laughed. "I'd really, *really* appreciate it."

"Seven years ago they yanked everybody out of there and a couple after that, a storm ripped through the place and destroyed it. You aware?"

"Still."

Wally nodded. "Must be pretty important research."

"I think so."

"Who is it again?"

Itsuki knew he'd never said a name.

"His name is Vito Sacristán," he began. "Wrote some seminal novels in the seventies and eighties. Disappeared in eighty-three."

"And you're looking for him?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you think he's here."

"Yes, sir."

"And why is that?"

The expedition had been brewing for several years by the time he decided to go. Other professors had suggested he look for Vito, take a sabbatical and follow some rumors. He did a little research one fall and found that Vito's wife, who eventually declared herself a widow, was still alive. She had no phone, no social media of any kind, no presence anywhere but in Cuenca, Ecuador. He sent her a letter requesting an interview and lauding her late husband's work. A month passed, then two, and a scathing response landed on his desk. *I appreciate your dedication to Vito's legacy. Unfortunately, I have absolutely no interest in discussing Vito with you or, really, with anyone.* He placed the letter, which he told no one about, in the bottom of his underwear drawer and forgot about it.

Christmas came and went. He and Gwen thought about adopting a baby but decided against it. The semester started back up and the gnomes got put back in the garden beds in front of Wheeler Hall. It was February when a student in his introduction to modern literature class asked what he was working on, and the answer was nothing. Nothing. It stayed with him in dreams, in visions, in late-night scribblings, in therapy sessions. He retrieved the letter from his drawer and booked a plane ticket to Cuenca for the beginning of March.

Vito's wife was more amenable in person than in her letter, but still refused to say much about her husband, *ex-husband*, she'd correct. He spent a month wandering the metropolitan web of Cuenca, putting his ear to the ground, to the grime in the alleys, working any job he could as he collected rumors on his spool. Several people had claimed to be Vito's children over the years, particularly after his disappearance put him in a limited spotlight in the national news. Itsuki spent weeks gathering them up, one by one, and requesting DNA

tests against some hair he'd gathered at Vito's wife's home. All but two agreed to it, and of the seven that went through the process, not one was Vito's child. He suspected that the two that had abstained were no closer to kin either. The trail went dead until one of them called Itsuki and admitted that, yes, they'd lied about being his kid, but that they'd really met him once, in a bar in Caracas called *Cabeza de Caballo*, the Horse's Head.

He bussed and backpacked and odd-jobbed his way across the rest of Ecuador and Colombia until he got to Caracas, and the bar. An interview with the owner revealed it had been a meeting place for communists in the seventies and eighties. The vanguard was all but extinct, but he reached out to the ones still kicking, interviewed them, took down notes, filled out binders. During one of the later interviews, Jorges Zora, a once-celebrated orator, pulled out a photo album and flipped through it with Itsuki until a photo of Vito appeared. It was him, drink in hand, elbow on counter, at the Horse's Head bar in Caracas. Itsuki recognized it immediately. And, according to Zora, it was taken in the summer of eighty-six, almost two years after Vito vanished from his home in Ecuador.

It was a marathon from there. More interviews. Talking with Vito's buddies, whispers of where he went, rumors that he was writing a book so dangerous he had to elude state spies, state assassins, and thus, go on his globe-trotting journey. Nonetheless, the interviews with the senile revolutionaries crystallized a central story. It seemed that Vito skipped around the region's climate research centers, doing work on his new book, though no one knew why, or what the book was about. He took down every station anyone mentioned to him anyway, and, one by one, from the RAIZ Institute in Brazil to the Los Tuxtlas Biodome in Mexico, he crossed them off the list. Eureka was the last and most remote of any of them.

When Itsuki finished explaining all this to Wally, the kettle on the stovetop started whistling. He took a moment, slid the kettle off the hot grate, and looked back at Itsuki like

he'd just seen a middle school production of *Waiting for Godot*. There was another pause, and then, Wally asked two questions:

"So, you're married, then?"

And,

"What kind of tea would you like?"

Itsuki felt his breath hitch in his throat, stuck on the uvula. He felt the wet gland of his tongue dry up, the wisdom teeth still buried in his gums rot in a single instance. It didn't seem like Wally cared, or that Tai did either, for that matter. Had Tai pawned him off to Wally?

"Do you have lavender? I'll take lavender."

Wally nodded. "Good choice."

"And yes," Itsuki said. "I am married, technically."

"Good. It's good for you. Hones you, I think."

"I'm sorry, but are you going to take me or not?"

Wally handed him his tea, which was nearly scalding, and sat back down, slouching against the tattered fur of the chair. He took a sip and sat his mug on the floor.

"There's a kayak tied out back. I'll take you first thing in the morning."

"Why not now?"

He rubbed his jaw. "There's a storm coming. And, besides, it'll take a second to show you the ropes. There's only one so I can't go with you."

Itsuki looked across the room, the house, to the small window that divided the two bookcases from one another. It was still clear. Some flurries, but no dark clouds. No winds that spoke of storms. Wally noticed him looking and laughed. Itsuki felt the heat behind his cheeks drain in an instant. He took another sip of tea to refill them.

The afternoon and evening plodded along. They talked about nothing for most of it, recovering the highlights of their lives. Wally had been a translator at the research station

between the predominantly English scientists and the predominantly Inuit town in the eighties. He quit that in the nineties, lived in Resolute for a second, and then returned to the village, to the little town opposite Eureka. That's when he started managing things and set up the supply chain from Aujuittuq to town. That's when Qimmiq was still running to and from every other week with boxes of canned peas and carrots and bags of potatoes and slabs of frozen beef. Wally had acquired the diesel engines for them during that time, replacing the gas boilers that now sat unused, abandoned, in the basements of several houses.

He got up abruptly in the middle of their conversation, claiming that he needed to talk to Tai about something. Itsuki picked through the penultimate chapter of *The Son is Not Enough*, as he had done a hundred times before, and tried not to think of Wally and Tai making jokes about him in the big cabin just up the hill. He tried, instead, to ruminate on the night he got the book, the tome in his very hands. He'd been asked by Russell Yarborough, who was then just a professor of literature and not Itsuki's mentor and confidant, to run food and drink at the department's winter gala. Itsuki rented a tux for seventy dollars and worked diligently the whole evening until he could sit in the back of the hall, eat cheese and crackers off the leftover platters, and listen to the department chair whine about the importance of higher education in *such turbulent times*.

Dr. Yarborough found him in the disparate crowds that formed at the closure of the gala. They congratulated one another on their successes of the night, on Russell's delivery of a presentation on Gaelic language revival, on Itsuki's delivery of Laurent-Perrier to tables six, seven, and fifteen. He handed Itsuki a thick, rectangle, wrapped in crinkly cardboard paper. He turned the novel over in his hands, wondering if Russell ever knew he'd end up in the distant Arctic, reading his gift in a stranger's house.

When Wally returned an hour later, storm clouds rolled in from the north and settled against the curve of the ridge. They made dinner together which, for Wally, was a

bologna-mustard-cheese sandwich on sourdough bread, and for Itsuki, was a mustard-cheese sandwich on sourdough bread. There was only a single beer left, so they split it into two paper cups and emptied them quickly.

"How was Eureka?" Itsuki asked.

"Busy. Very busy. There weren't many of us, but still, everyone had everything to do all the time. Some of the smartest people, maybe *the* smartest people, I've ever met."

"Do you ever wish you could go back?"

"Hell no," he spat. "It was a terrible job. Translators should be the richest people on the planet, with all the shit I dealt with. I'm glad it's gone."

Wally crumbled his cup in one hand and tossed it behind the bed, into the trash can near the kitchenette. Two things became abundantly clear to Itsuki at that moment: one, neither Wally nor Tai really cared about helping him get to Eureka, or finding Vito, or would ever understand the gravity of the situation, even if they did help him; and two, if he wanted to get to the station, he'd have to do it himself. When they went to sleep, he made sure that Wally took the bed so that he could move his coats to the chairs near the heater and sleep there, with them, and the satchel, and all that he had brought.

He read Sacristán by the orange glow of the standing heater for most of the night, forgoing sleep in exchange for the security of wakefulness. Wally's snoring was annoying at first, but eventually became a pleasant backdrop, a nice addition to the electric hum of the heater, the banging of the stormwinds outside. He added notes to the tenth chapter of *The Son is Not Enough* and corrected old scribblings along the margins. *As soon as we are born, we're indebted to our mothers. Our fathers raise us and we owe them, too. We owe friends and uncles and aunts. We'll never be able to repay them and they never come collecting. We do the same for our children, and our friends, and never ask them for payment either.*

The storm climbed over the other side of the ridge in the blue hour before dawn. When he was sure that that the last clouds were gone, and that the wind would not carry him back across the tundra to balmy Philadelphia, Itsuki packed his satchel, threw on his parka, his over-pants, his boots, tied his waistcloth back around, and began to walk toward the front of the house. He made his steps heavy at first, to see if Wally was faking, would wake up and stop him, but the man didn't move an inch, just kept snoring under his pile of blankets. He took another step, a heavier one, and Wally shuffled, turned over in his cocoon to face the wall. Something in Itsuki's boots, his feet, his marrow, pulled him back across the room, across the centerline of the house, toward Wally's bed until he was almost standing him.

Would Vito sleep like this, buried, hibernating, like a pile of donated coats? Vito was bright and cheerful. There was youth in Wally's cheeks, but how much? How much youth do you lose in a place like this? Itsuki's shoulders settled for the first time in memory. Snore stuttered out from Wally's nose, a sigh escaped his mouth. Vito would not snore, no. His lungs would not stammer, not shutter, not falter in this isolated corner of the world. Itsuki's hands reached out, to shake Wally back to life, to force him into waking existence again, but he recoiled at the last moment, his fingernails clawing at the rough fabric of a tattered quilt. Itsuki turned to the door, to the front of the house. Vito's not here, he thought. He's out there.

The storm had left a mess in its wake. Dunes drifted in new directions, leaned against the houses. Icicles lay shattered in the snow. A misty haze enshrouded everything further than a few feet ahead. Itsuki tightened the hood of his parka and found the kayak tied on hooks behind the house. It was a slender, yellow thing. It reminded him of the shoes that the Keebler elves wore in those ads, only the pointy bits were on both ends. He unknotted the rope keeping it to the wall and let it fall to the snow in a soft pat. It wasn't until he brought it all the way to the shoreline that he realized he didn't have any oars. He remembered the ones

hanging in Tai's house, dropped his stuff against a dune, and ran toward the middle of the hill. He'd have to be quieter than with Wally. Tai woke up almost immediately when he entered the house the first time. Then again, Itsuki hadn't been that graceful.

He made his way through the fog until his hands landed on Tai's door. To his left, he could see that the storm had knocked the dog sleds down from their position against the house. They sat on their bottoms now, facing the downward slope of the hill. Itsuki fumbled for the door handle, and he held it tight once he found it. He pushed his way inside, making sure the door didn't swing and shake the house again. It was dark, but he could make out the oars on their hooks above the altar. Pulling one down, it felt light in his hand. He wondered if they were decorative, but, even still, they'd do as well, just something to push through the water. He'd do it with two paper plates if he had to. The bobblehead was back in its spot on the mantle. He tip-toed back outside, back down the hill, to the kayak and satchel he'd left at the shore. The water licked against the snow, exposing rock and clay beneath. Chunks of ice rode the tide and broke against the shore, splintering into invisible pieces.

He'd never been kayaking before, had been boating with friends and professors and his wife several times, usually on special occasions, but never kayaking. They'd discussed going white water rafting together and, though he wasn't sure if it was the same thing, he imagined they were similar. There was a small hole in the top, where he'd slip in his legs, climb inside. He knew there was space in the triangular end of it so that he could stretch his legs out in front of him. He turned the kayak on its side, slipped his legs in, and rocked until it landed back on its bottom. He slung the satchel around his opposite shoulder, secured the strap around his torso so it wouldn't bounce or move as he paddled. Tucking the oar under his free arm, he clawed through the snow, pushing himself nearer to the water. The cold seeped into his gloves, creeping into its grooves. The kayak met the cold lap of the water and, with a final push, dipped into the channel.

He pushed the oar to the right, and the kayak moved to the left. He pushed the oar to the left, and the kayak moved to the right. Right, which was left, and then left, which was right. Back and forth, back and forth, right then left, Itsuki paddled through the frozen sea, pushing jagged relics of ice away as he moved toward the station. The antennas blinked bright and red through the fog, beckoning him like the lighthouses in Chesapeake Bay. He guessed that automated systems were keeping them alive, like that Bradbury story, the echoes of alarms and automated ovens ringing out to no one but the passing polar bear, should they still exist. Itsuki pushed against a boulder of ice, tipped the kayak slightly to one side, and felt a small pool of water climb into the bottom of the vessel. It settled under the fat of his legs, where his snow pants and sweatpants and long-Johns bunched up together behind the knee.

He readjusted the kayak so it was straight again and kept paddling. The pool began to soak through his snow pants, the sleek outer layer. The strap of his satchel dug into his chest, searing a new bruise into the tissue right above his heart. He used the friction between his parka and the strap as momentum. Pushing against the strap, flinging his body weight forward, paddling another few feet through the channel. The red lights were getting closer, but he didn't know how far they were from shore. A strong wind came down from the hill and rocked the kayak. Another small pool of water collected in the bottom of the boat. He felt it leak into his boots. A fog settled over the flashing hills of his brain.

The further he paddled, the more the nose of the kayak seemed to raise, the slower his thoughts became. The satchel dug deeper and deeper into his chest, pulling his center of gravity backward, away from his gut and into the marrow of his spine. His brittle decades rose to meet the weight, bones weak, calcium molecules dissolving in an instant. The wind knocked water in. He didn't feel it in the fat of his legs anymore. It was a smooth pool all the way around, submerging an inch of his body.

The channel pushed back against the broads of the oar and grew more and more like tar with every paddle. He pushed, still. Lightning shot down a nerve in his neck, sizzling down the length of his right arm in a single instant, unearthing something, shattering a wall, dissolving some barrier between this moment and all the ones before it. Years began to flood his marrow. He paddled, kept paddling, and the nose of the kayak turned up and up and up. Ice gathered around him, watching, tracking his every move. The walrus heads watched, too, glaring from their disembodied position on the other beach. The satchel tugged his center of gravity out from his body, away from the gut, away from the spine, until it was somewhere in a liminal space behind him. The weight felt unbearable. The nose of the kayak tipped in the fog of the world, of his mind, rupturing the buoyancy of both, flooding everything. Itsuki gripped the oar in his numb hand and tugged at the strap with the other. Impossible gravity crushed his fingers as the satchel dislodged from his body and tumbled into the frozen water.

The bag stretched its gaping mouth like Jonah's whale and vomited into the sea. Itsuki's web of neurons all fired at once, imploding the half-century structure, collapsing the skyscrapers and shuttering the pipes and gas lines. Fire hydrants spewed rare water into the sky. The houses of his mind blazed and the universities burned and great tongues of fire licked the onset of night as it settled over the cranial atmosphere.

Itsuki watched the binders unfurl and loosen their notes and newspaper clippings into the water. The letters from Vito's wife unhooked from their paperclip, drowned in the bay, disappeared below the water. The novels, the nights Itsuki had spent with them, the mornings with coffee, the boney fingers tracing yellowed pages, old hands on old paper, they joined the crowd, too, and, page by page, the tomes took on water, softening, losing form, and when the weight was too much to bear, and the book was bogged beyond belief, too heavy to live, it vanished beneath the placid mirror of the channel and was no more. One then another then another then another. Ink stained the tide and painted the ice black.

Eyes closed, Itsuki clung to the oar with both hands, holding it against his chest. The wind blew his parka hood loose and the jostle of the sea sickened him. Every inch of skin stung, every tendon tightened, every cell screeched. *Bad days are the only universal human experience*. The words rang in his head as the kayak bumped suddenly into the shoreline. He opened his eyes. Above, he could see the lights, big and red like many moons in the sky just over the beach, and the shadows of the huts and the boilers and the cafeteria and laboratory standing like dark forms in the fog. He rocked the kayak onto its side and dislodged his body from the vessel. Water poured out from the hole, forming a small river on the snowbank.

He clawed up the bank, his legs unmoving, away from the shore, from the frozen chop of the water. He flopped onto his back and thought of Gwen. The wind whistled through the station behind him, singing through its wreckage. He pulled his necklace out from behind his sweater, his parka, away from the cold of his chest. A small silver chain fell into his hand. A gold ring hung at the end, tinted red by the antennas nearby. Itsuki rolled the ring between his fingers and hoped that she understood, that she knew him as well as he wished she did, or as he wished anyone would want to know him. He wished that she could see him, that she could see what he saw, the edifice of Eureka standing above him, a cathedral in the mist, as if the sight of it would make it all make sense, make everyone understand.

A spinning display rack appeared on the snow in front of him, the kind he'd seen in department stores and thrift barns. He reached up and grabbed a postcard down from one of the shelves. It was the picture the cute stranger at the hotel in Barbados had taken for him and Gwen on their honeymoon. They beamed with stupid grins. Flowery hats shadowed their heads, their faces. Itsuki couldn't see a freckle or wrinkle on them, though he knew they were there. He pulled down another postcard from the rack. It was the bobblehead from the hotel lobby, waving, curly letters shouting *Greetings from Eureka!* above him. Another from the rack. Three college kids on an airplane together. Another. He and Russell at the department

gala. Another. Vito, his last known location, at a bar in Venezuela, the Horse's Head, elbow on counter, face turned to camera, weeping. Another.

Itsuki's legs crowded with absence. He felt the nerves in his ankle, and his foot, and his waist give out in painful whimpers. The collapse cascaded up one side of his body, then the other. His torso sizzled like tar and lost sensation. The bruises on his shoulders steamed and he knew there was nothing more to do now. Morning broke over the hill, across the kayak and snow, and pale light filtered down through the mist. Ahead, on the mainland, Itsuki spotted a silhouette in the haze, a man about Wally's height. He was surrounded by dogs.

Suppertime or the Secret History of Nosebleeds

The afternoon I uncovered Tomás' addiction was the same afternoon we made the most sultry, most exquisite escalivada any of us had ever seen. It was our first of that season, in fact, our way to welcome fall back to New England together. That was Abuela Nina, my namesake, living in us. She and Mom couldn't use their tiny gaslit stove during the summer, less the heat choked them to death, so the moment it was cool enough, the moment that they felt the wind drop and the clouds roll over Philadelphia, they'd huddle together by the stovetop and make escalivada. It was autumn's maiden dish, and years of the ritual had baked the recipe into our hands, had settled flakes of gold in the trenches of our palms. All we had to do was trace the fleshy creases, feel the grains catch our fingernails, and we'd know the ingredient list, the measuring specifications, the order of assembly. That night, though, we didn't have to read our palms. There was no need. The recipe hummed in our throats, glittered like fireflies in the fog-world of our peripheries. It'd never been like that before.

I unwrapped the vegetables while Tomás retrieved the spices. We assembled the collection on the island in the middle of the kitchen, on the smooth grey countertop that complimented the pine-colored paint of the cabinets and the checkerboard tiles of the floor. While I washed, he stirred salt and pepper and a pinch of paprika in a plastic mixing bowl on the counter against the wall. There was no measuring specification for the seasoning, the only instructions were, add until *right*. Tomás brought the bowl over just as I laid the vegetables out for their lathering. He disappeared suddenly into the pantry, letting the saloon doors creak in his wake, before bursting out a moment later with a heavy glass jar in tow. The thick, yellow liquid inside sloshed against its rounded edges. It was Dad's homemade olive oil, a delicacy he'd spent years perfecting. He usually kept it in wine bottles but by then Mom's drinking had slowed, because she didn't want to become Abuelo, I guess, and he had to resort to storing it in leftover mason jars and stainless steel pots.

Tomás cradled it gently like a bottle of fine wine, beaming the dead-ringer smile of a seasoned waiter. When we were teenagers, he'd entertain Mom and Dad's dinner party guests by stacking glasses and plates against the pale meadow of his arm, five, six at a time. He could balance a saucer, two glasses, a dinner plate, another three glasses, and an ice cream bowl at the same time. He'd tiptoe around the edge of the giant table, grinning. The crowd would clap, cheer when he was making a particular spectacle of it. Aunts, uncles, Mom's fencing friends, Dad's producers. Everyone loved his show.

"Hatch, two-thousand and fifteen," he said, presenting the jar.

I smiled and took it from him. "Gracias, monsieur."

We grabbed our brushes and got into position at the far side of the island, in front of the casserole dishes. I unhooked the lid from the jar, and we dug in. The first step was lathering the vegetables in the oil, making sure you didn't drown them, making sure you didn't get your fingers wet either, so there wasn't any contamination. Tomás was always better at that than I was. He held the end of the eggplant between two fingers, spinning his brush around the violet skin until a single, uninterrupted sheen covered the surface.

"You should do a painting like that," I said, starting on a bell pepper.

He sniffled. "I don't think that'd go very well."

"Really?"

"Really. Not the right oil. It's too wet. Regular oil's fickle as is, imagine doing a whole canvas, coming back a week later, and it's still wet to the touch."

I nodded. "Never dries."

"Never dries. What good is a painting that never stays?"

We finished wetting the vegetables and stood back and looked at our work. I suspected then that we were in for something special. Never had they glistened so warmly, green and red and purple and brown, colors melting into one another under the orange glow

of the kitchen light. I washed my hands and helped Tomás put away the olive oil and the spices and the little mixing bowl and the stray spoons and forks we'd used to mix and puncture and caress. He checked the temperature of the oven and slid the vegetables in when he was sure it was hot enough.

I called out to the U-Home monitor on the counter behind us and set a timer for sixty minutes. The dainty, Spanish voice that Dad liked to call *Pequeña Suzie* affirmed the timer and fell away with a soft, chime-like hum. Tomás grabbed some real wine from the fridge and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"Think Sy will join us?"

He grinned. "El gran guitarrista?"

"Not nice."

"I don't know, Nina," he said, shrugging. "Is he practicing?"

I walked to the edge of the island and glanced out the back door. The breeze rattled the windows and swept through the trees and sent dead leaves to second deaths on the brown grass below. The backyard was blanketed in this brown-red pastiche. The leafy tide lapped onto the tennis court, covering the faded green tarmac. The net turned and turned in the wind, spinning itself into binds and knots that the next set of players would have to unspool. Sy, our younger brother, the runt, was nowhere in the scene.

"Not tennis," I said, finally.

He took a sip straight from the bottle. "You'll have to check upstairs then."

"It's fine. I'm sure he'll come down. It'll be nice to have us all together."

"Mm," he said through his gulp.

"Won't it?"

"Honestly, Nina, we don't really try unless you're here."

My chest tightened. "I didn't know that."

"Lots of moving parts."

"Well. We can make it happen tonight, at least."

"If Sy the impaler decides to join, yes."

"Jesus, Tommy. Are you philosophically opposed to being nice to him?"

He showed me his palms. "What? It's up to him, isn't it?"

"That is *not* what you mean."

"I'm advocating for his bodily autonomy."

"No you're not."

"Bodily autonomy is nice. Am I not my brother's keeper?"

There was this smile painted on his face. It was far beyond shit-eating. No one living or dead or that's ever lived or died has had this smile. It's the kind of grin that thrives on the width of a pin, the ire of the world balanced on the infinitely small chance that frustration will manifest charm, that anger will conjure delight. That was his art and his alone. Not Dad or Mom or me or Sy could say something like that and get away with it. He could hang dirty laundry in the living room and make it smell like roses and daffodils. I didn't respond to him, I couldn't. I just shook my head and left it, but that was its own kind of reply.

We decided to idle the first hour of the cook by playing mancala in the den. It was the best room in the house, by anyone's judgment. The walls were covered, floor to ceiling, with handcrafted bookcases. Each and every shelf was full. There were Buddhist tomes and poetry collections and volumes on Greek history. Across the room, near the door that led into the adjoining bathroom, picture books from our childhood leaned against one another in a stout, old bookcase. There were two reading chairs against the right wall, the only doorless section in the room. Dad's desk sat near the center of the space, stacked with papers and binders and notes. There were several side tables placed around the room, some with lamps, none with

candles, a couple with family photos that I barely recognized. I sat the mancala board on an ottoman, dragged it in between the reading chairs, and plopped down.

Tomás won the first game, handily. During the second, the ashy perfume of the escalivada slinked its way through the kitchen, past the dining room, down the hallway, and into the den. The roast in the air reminded me of the sick days I'd spend at home, listening to Dad practice lines, waiting for the next spoonful of grilled squash and the next half-true story about Hollywood. He'd fooled all three of us into believing that ghosts of dead actors roamed everywhere in California, on the beaches, in the valleys, begging for change on street corners, sheltering from rain under shop awnings. Sy was the only one who ever challenged him on it.

Dad would say something like, *and that's why, still today, people see Marilyn Monroe walking the streets of Los Angeles, aimless and mourning.*

Sy'd position himself at the ready, little palms pushed against his knees, so he could thrust himself up in one motion and stand at three and a half feet and point at Dad with the fiercest finger God ever made and proclaim, *if ghosts were real, every place would be so haunted!* These outbursts frustrated me and Tomás. We knew ghosts weren't real, but we liked the stories regardless, the magic they festered in us, and we didn't want the charade called out all the time. Still, it excited us, Sy standing up to Dad, two feet between them, irrevocable decades of distance. Dad only ever gave one reply:

How do you know? Have you been everywhere?

I think Sy'd taken it to heart. He graduated high school and made his way through all of New England, up to Ann Arbor, down to the battlefields in Maryland and Virginia, spent a summer in Arizona with some friends, visited Los Angeles and San Francisco and found no ghosts, traveled up to Seattle when he was exploring music and grunge and Riot grrrl, went to Texas and hated it, as we all suspected he would. He came back to Boston and asked Mom and Dad for some money to go to Switzerland, but he was two years older and the green spell

of his youth and the generosity it usually conjured from them had vanished. They said no, and he'd come home with his tail between his legs.

As the warmth of the oven swallowed us and insulated the room from the drafty power of the wind, the second game reached a classic crescendo. Each of us had a handful of little, smooth stones, equal in what we had gained throughout the game. It was down to the math of it. Tomás ended up prevailing, again, though he acknowledged that it was a matter of probability more than anything. Luck had a way of siding with him, though. It was then that he first excused himself to the little bathroom on the other side of the den. I hadn't noticed it before, but I did when he returned.

There was a small patch of dry red skin above his lip, right beneath the soft slope of his nose that culminated in a little ball. Small, white flakes peeled away from the creases between his mouth and his nostrils. It looked like he had rubbed it raw.

The third game was much different. He couldn't seem to calculate his moves correctly, either outpacing himself or settling for too small a scoring group. He won so often because he knew how to maximize scoring, knew when to add to his own side or when to secure some stones for the final tally. That part of his strategy was all off, though, and the game was over before it started. If he played Mom, that was not unusual. She was terrible at mancala, and admittedly so. But he and I had good games, long ones. I counted the tally half-hoping it was close. It wasn't. I won by eight stones, which might've been a personal record. I was too surprised to celebrate it, to rub it in his face.

I passed out the stones again, quickly, back in the starting position, hoping that this time, he'd gain ground and win the series and prove my sliver of hope wrong. Again, something was off. He kept tallying one, two stones at a time. Within fifteen minutes, the game was over and I'd won. I didn't even bother counting the score.

I set up the board again. His face was turned slightly away from me so that the lamplight of the room only illuminated half of him, leaving dark shadows under his eyes, under his nose, in the hooks of his features, where light went to die. He had this roundness, this moonness. Rosy cheeks, fine, shaggy black hair that he refused to cut or really to take care of at all. The half-face exaggerated it. He looked like a troll.

"How long has it been?" I asked.

"Since?"

"Since you all have gotten together."

He expelled air like he was blowing out a candle. "I don't know."

"Guess."

"Why does it matter?"

"It doesn't. I'm just curious."

"I don't know," he repeated. "Months."

"Months?"

"I don't know. I'm probably wrong."

"You all live together."

"We play games sometimes. Mancala."

"You've been here since March, Tommy."

He eyed me. "Thanks for the reminder."

I'd done well up to that point not to mention it. That very word, *March*, was the moniker we'd unconsciously agreed meant the series of cascading failures that had dethroned Tomás from the good graces of a small, but prestigious and very expensive, art school in Maine. Poor grades, bad temper. It was a combination. Like Sy, he'd come back home in the erroneous search for money. Unlike Sy, he'd left when that plan failed and attempted to stick it out on his own in an apartment downtown. He only lasted two weeks.

The fifth game, the last in our little series, had ballooned in my favor by the middle but slimmed and slimmed and kept on slimming towards him during our conversation. It was like words gained him ground. The more he talked, the better he seemed to do. I became convinced he was enchanting me and the stones, and that he'd been doing so all along, just without either of us knowing. We sat in silence and counted our scores, though I was sure he had just barely beat me out. He threw a fist against his chest and beamed this shit-eating grin when he realized he'd won the game and, thus, won our series.

Pequeña Suzie alerted us that our one-hour timer was up and little bird-like chirping rang throughout the house, cascading from speaker to speaker, echoing against the empty hallways and high ceilings. Tomás asked if I could check it while he went to the bathroom (again), and I told him I would. The kitchen was full of pepper and roast and onion. Salt and paprika nestled in my nerve endings. There was nothing more *us* than that, an overwhelming smell of ash and spice. I took an oven mitt down from its hook and peeked inside at the escalivada. With one hand, I kept the oven door open, and, with the other, I poked my finger against the skins of the vegetables. They were softening, but not quite there. I was worried we'd set the heat too low, that it'd take too long and soggy the middle, but worried equally that turning it up would burn them. I looked away and put another hour on the timer.

When Tomás came back, he was wearing a brown cardigan of Dad's, no doubt stolen from his office chair in the den. It hung around him like a cape, swallowing his figure. The closer he got, the more clearly I could see it. The red spot was there again, white flakes of dry skin dotting the little dip above his mouth. His whole nose was red this time. He rubbed it between two fingers and asked me if I wanted to play another series. I told him no and lied that there was a book I'd been meaning to dig into.

"Suit yourself," he said.

"You should ask Sy."

He shook his head. "I'm okay."

Footsteps creaked down the stairwell off the foyer, halfway across the house.

"Speak of the devil," Tomás said.

I bobbed my head at him. "I'll kill you. I swear to god."

"It's an expression."

Sy glided into the room in a bathrobe. He was scrawny, always had been. It made him invisible on the tennis court. Other kids, taller ones, could be tracked, but Sy was an enigma. This skeleton of a kid rocketing through the air with almost no impression, no presence, just the scuff of his shoes on the asphalt and the crack of his racket against the ball. He smiled at us and moved toward the fridge. Dark bangs hung along his eyebrows, half-concealing his forehead, and blew out in curtain-like frills around his ears. The band of his eyepatch poked through the hair, covering his right eye.

He pulled down some apple juice and set it next to Tomás' wine.

"It'll just be us for dinner," he said.

He grabbed a mug from the cabinet, filled it up halfway, took a sip, and topped off the rest without looking back at us.

"What? What do you mean?" I asked.

"Mom's running extra drills with a student and Dad said a pitch meeting turned into dinner, so it'll just be us."

"They called you?" Tomás asked. "Both of them?"

"Just Dad, but yeah. I guess Mom told him and he told me."

He scoffed. "Are they aware that Nina and I have phones?"

"So they'll just be late then, yeah?"

Sy shook his head. “No, Dad said not to expect them. And yes, he clearly knows you all have phones. I suspect a hidden agenda to that question.”

“It wasn’t a question,” Tomás bit back.

“Clearly.”

“*Hey.*”

I looked at them both, somehow at the same time. Sy took another swig of juice and raised his eyebrows. Tomás had the same expression. He grabbed the wine bottle and a wine glass and poured himself half-full. He offered some to me, but I didn’t take it. The wine and the apple juice disappeared back into the fridge.

“We’ll just wait for them. No problem.”

Sy held his mug against his chest. “No, like. They’re not coming.”

“We can’t do escalivada without them.”

“It’s fine,” Tomás said. “There’ll be leftovers.

Sy sniffed the air.

“It smells fucking great.”

“Takes a lot of work,” Tomás bit, unmoving.

I eyed him. “Thanks, Sy.”

He smiled softly into the unwrinkled curve of his cheeks, this doughy glint. He took another sip, and another, and gulped the last bit down. The mug clattered into the sink.

“I think I’m gonna get ready and practice,” he said.

I nodded. “Sounds good.”

As he walked, the pink fluff of his bathrobe draped along the tile and the wooden flooring of the hallway. His footsteps ricocheted across the house. I could feel his slide-like walk, this snaking, hovering gait, in my own feet. He was always like that, totally consumed

by a big sweater or a bathrobe or a coat. You could never get a good sense of how small he really was. When I heard the door to Sy's room shut, I turned to Tomás.

"Don't," he said before I got a word out.

"I haven't said anything."

He sipped. "You're going to. And I just don't want to discuss it."

"Can't you just be nice?" I blurted. "For once?"

"What room do I have to be nice?"

"You always have the opportunity to be nice."

"Christ alive, Nina. You sound like a proverbs calendar."

Something in me loosened, some bolt, some nail. My voice pushed through the dirt of my throat like a weed in the heat of August.

"He's nineteen. You were nineteen once, not that long ago."

"Exactly, yes, he's *nineteen* and still they baby him. He can take care of himself."

"He lost his fucking eye," I said. "Wouldn't you baby that kid?"

"That was a decade ago, and still it's happening. They didn't call you. They didn't call me. They called *him*, and they'll call him every time."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "Does it matter who they call if they say the same thing?"

Tomás scoffed. "Let's stop this, please. We're adults."

"Then act like one."

"When'll you tell *him* that?"

I shook my head. "I'm doing my best here."

"Who asked you to? Because it wasn't me."

"No one asked me, I just—"

"For the love of god, I told you I didn't wanna do this."

He raised the glass to his lips and a mote of blood dropped silently into the leftover pool of wine. The second drop fell to his bottom lip, and he noticed it then. Quickly, he set the glass down and covered his nose with the whole of his hand.

"I'll be right back," he said, nasally.

I nodded, not saying a word. He left the room holding his nose so firmly, it seemed like he was scared his whole face would fall apart, like the story with the woman and the green ribbon, like if he didn't hold his nose in place, the strings keeping his skin together would snap and his skeleton would unglue and his muscles untether and his whole body crumble into a heap of flesh at the doorway between the den and the kitchen, which would be a really inconvenient place for such a mess. The door to the den bathroom slammed shut.

Ten minutes passed. The oven hummed electric music into the room. The fridge hummed, too, slightly higher. They weren't compatible notes, though, not a harmony in sight. I wondered if I could pop some bread in the toaster and get the right pitch, turn the dial to the highest setting, get a C sharp, turn the dial down, get an E flat. I thought about licking my finger and running it along the rim of Tomás' wine glass, that it could be the missing factor. I thought about hitting spoons together, or knocking a knife against the rim of Sy's mug, or smashing a nice plate on the floor. Maybe it would sing out a beautiful chord.

I asked the U-Home how much time was left, and she replied half an hour, which meant he'd been gone for twenty minutes or more. There didn't seem to be any sound coming from the den, though, not to my memory, anyway. Sy returned to the kitchen during that time. He had tied the shag of his hair back in a little bun. A white shirt and a pair of sleek, blue gym shorts hung on him like blankets, hiding his frame from view. He shuffled around me and made his way to the back door.

"So, how're things?"

He looked up at me. "How're things?"

I shrugged. “With guitar. With tennis.”

“They’re good.”

“Are you still taking lessons?”

“Guitar, yes. Tennis, no.”

“How’re guitar lessons?”

“Fine,” he said. “Miss Hamblin's cool.”

“Cool?”

He smiled. “Hot.”

“Ah,” I said, smiling back.

“Where’s Tommy?”

“Bathroom.”

“Oh,” he said, scratching the bottom of his bun. “If you see him, let him know he’s free to join me. I could use someone to play against.”

I nodded. “I’ll tell him.”

Sy went outside and I watched, through the glass of the door, as he went to the shed and carried out the little cart we kept tennis balls in. He threw down a racket next to it, and then pulled out this small soccer goal to the other side of the net so that the balls had somewhere to pool when he, undoubtedly, hit them clear across the court. He was a machine. The balls went up in the air, one by one by one, little green dots in the shadowy afternoon, and, one by one by one, vanished in a blur over the net. It reminded me of a particle accelerator, Sy the vast, insurmountable mystery that happens within it.

When I was sure Tomás had been gone for half an hour, I left the viewing stand and crossed through the kitchen and the dining room, past the remnants of our mancala tournament, and to the far door, the gate to the bathroom. I listened, but I was sure he had heard me coming. There wasn’t a noise, not a creak, not a sniffle. I knocked.

"Tomás? You okay?"

"What? Oh yeah, just a nosebleed."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, no, I'm fine. Just cleaning up."

I stood by the door and listened. He was ripping off toilet paper, wiping his nose, and dropping it somewhere. Again, ripping, wiping, and throwing it away. The motion repeated and repeated. There was nothing in my ears, no noise, no hum, no ambient distraction, but the uninterrupted sound of Tomás rubbing his nose raw. I stood back as the sink hummed with water. The faucet squeaked off, and then there was the sound of the mirror-cabinet opening and then closing. And then the door opened and Tomás appeared.

"What?" he asked.

The spot above his lip was crimson, completely inflamed. His cheeks were red, too, and his nose. His whole face was puffy. Small pools of water pushed against the fat lower lip of his eyelid. The cardigan was tied around his waist, the sleeves crumpled in brown bunches at his sides. In the lamplight, I could see the sheen of vaseline he had applied to the dry skin. It hadn't helped. It made it more obvious, if anything.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

He nodded. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Has this been happening?"

"Yeah, kinda," he said, moving past me. "It's just a thing."

I turned and watched him walk toward the kitchen. "A thing?"

"I think it's the difference in the weather. Fall here's so much wetter than in Manhattan. And it's colder so much quicker. I like it here better, I think, it's just the change, you know, the difference between the two."

I felt his footing slipping in my shoes, the words slick with water.

"Why are you being so weird about this?" I asked.

He turned back. The light of the kitchen poured a silhouette around his figure, framing him perfectly in the doorway between the two. Mom and Dad had designed the house together, but they had done it without us in mind, or so I assumed, have assumed, but in that moment, it felt like they'd designed that doorway just for him.

"What're you talking about?" he asked.

"It's just a nosebleed."

"Yeah. It's just this thing. Like I said, the seasons."

"But."

I felt my feet push against his, plunge him into the tide, sink him in the oncoming water. Our boats collided, our jets facing one another on the runway.

He shrugged. "It's just the season."

His hand went to rub his nose, but his mind seemed to stop it. The fingers curled back against the palm like a spider sprayed with pesticide, returning to the fetal, to the final. He hung his hand slack against his side. The empty sleeve of the cardigan extended the silhouette so that his arms stretched down to his knees.

"Sorry," I said. "Sorry, I'm just worried."

He laughed. "As always."

"Sy wants you to join him for tennis."

"Fun," he said, smiling. "Can you finish the escalivada?"

"Of course."

He nodded and turned back toward the kitchen. The whole of his back went dark and the silhouette became formless. I followed close, and also far, but he was out the door and in the backyard before I could say anything else to him. Sy greeted him, but the exchange was muffled by the wall and the door. The wind spun and swallowed their words. I asked Pequeña

Suzie how much was left and she told me ten minutes, in that electric harpsichord kind of voice of hers. Whether it was Abuela working in me, as she seemed to always be, especially then, or it was my own impatience, I don't know, but whatever it was, I'm glad it decided to surge through me because if I hadn't taken out the vegetables then and there, they wouldn't have been as good. It was perfect timing.

I sat the casserole dishes on the island, near the edge by the backdoor, so I could peel away the soft skins of the vegetables and watch the boys play tennis at the same time. Tomás had discarded the cardigan at some point. It lay in the leaves somewhere. I could really only see him, because as Sy moved, so did he, blocking my line of sight, but, even with my remote view, I could tell they were really competing. Sy would jump, giving me a glimpse of his sweaty t-shirt, and slam the cracked yellow-green ball against the racket. Flames seemed to burn the skin off as it rocketed toward Tomás. He parried it, sending the comet toward Sy, and Sy hit it back with even more force, with even more speed.

Once the skins were off, I sliced the soft underbellies of the vegetables into narrow slivers. The eggplant's purple gut fell into rectangular pieces in the dish. The onion was beautiful and off-white. Its strips reflected my face, my eyes. I sliced the tomato carefully, making sure that it didn't fall apart, as it usually did, and, somehow, it didn't. Tomás served and the ball met the soft part of Sy's court, right in the score, where it hurt. There was something said, something exchanged again, but I couldn't hear it. I finished with the bell peppers. Their rinds peeled away with extraordinary ease. Red, green, yellow, like bastard apples, I held their shells in a single hand and dumped them into the nearby trash can with the rest of the scraps. Even the garbage smelled heavenly.

We kept broad, oval-shaped plates for the escalivada, almost exclusively. I took one down, layered on the slices, the eggplant, pepper, tomato, in a messy line. Their colors

overlapped one another like leaves in a pile. I pinched salt over the heap and poured on some of the leftover oil until a small, barely visible pool formed at the bottom of the plate.

The boys kept on playing. For a brief moment, when I could see them both, arms raised, rackets high, they looked like knights, the ones Mom and Dad acted out when we were little. We'd assemble in the living room, the three of us with our chubby legs hung over the big cushions of the couch. Dad growled and huffed like a dragon and Mom beat him back with one of her fencing blades, like the fierce heroine she was. We clapped and cheered every time, egging on the fight. And then, one by one, we'd join their scene. Tomás first, since he was oldest. Sometimes he played a dragon, sometimes he was Mom's shining steed. I joined after him, right in the middle, balancing out the troop so two dragons could fight two knights, matched with equal courage, equal valor. And then finally Sy joined, our caboose. But when we looked back, there was no one watching. The three little heads that used to crane and gasp were gone. It was just the five of us, together on stage, staring at an empty couch.

Our escalivada is usually served with bread and the bread usually comes with cheese, but I didn't want either. I picked up a pile of vegetables with my fingers, covering the creases of my hand, my palm, with Dad's olive oil. The slices melted in my mouth, burning spice and pepper into my tongue, sending ash and smoke and Abuela down the slimy chute of my throat. It was the best we'd ever made. No question. When I was done chewing, and sure that the wind wasn't Mom coming in through the front door, I poked my head out into the backyard, into the afternoon, and let them know:

"Dinner's ready."

Critical Afterword

Aims and Inspirations

This critical afterword aims to accomplish three primary objectives: first, to discuss the novels, authors, and particular short stories that have influenced, guided, or impacted the construction of my own stories; secondly, to thoroughly examine macroscopic structures and themes that develop across the quartet from one narrative to the next; and thirdly, to explain the decisions behind the employment of particular craft elements as they relate to the desired outcome of a specific story. These objectives will not be accomplished in clean, sequential order but rather in interwoven analytical discussions that will, at times, overlap one topic with another. This critical model will allow me to both explore the many dimensions of narrative craft *and* demonstrate the high degree of interconnectivity that exists between and among numerous facets of short story production.

In regards to the third objective, it's important to clarify that each story in this quartet has a set of unique critical needs and, thus, the dissections of individual stories will vary in length and focus. Accordingly, the analysis of "The Snow in Sarajevo" will concentrate on the story's nontraditional structure, treatment of time, and the purposes behind those narrative movements, while the analysis of "Ground to Land On" will focus on the craft of its dialogue and the story texture that particular dialogue style renders. The analysis of "Eureka Station" will explore the character psychology of Itsuki Yashima, his descent into obsessive insanity, and how that descent interacts with the story's frigid setting to create a unique sense of place. And, lastly, the analysis of "Suppertime or the Secret History of Nosebleeds" will survey the story's imagery, the sensory details that I engaged to produce those images, and the symbolic impact those details and images have on the narrative's overarching meaning and conclusion.

The critical labor is divided between these four analyses— structure/time in "Sarajevo," dialogue/texture in "Ground," character/place in "Eureka," and sense/meaning in

"Suppertime,"— so that an understanding of narrative craft be yielded from the particular dissections themselves as well as the spectrum of discussions that occur across them. The sections that follow this one, '*On Macrostructures*' and '*On Theme*', will act as an analytical scaffold for the deeper, closer-to-the-bone studies that occur in those later dissections.

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Five books were instrumental in constructing, considering, and comprehending the crafting of this thesis. Three of these books were works of fiction and each have served and continue to serve slightly different functions.

Jennifer Egan's Pulitzer-prize winning novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, is not only one of the most celebrated works of this century but one of the most personally impactful works I've come across. The novel, composed of thirteen interconnected short stories, details the world and lives of a large cast of characters, all of which are subject to or arbiters of the kinds of regret, misery, and contempt that stirs in people when time marches on and passes once-important people into obscurity and erasure. The episodes that demonstrate this unique, banal sadness move back and forth in time; "The Gold Cure," the second story in the novel, focuses on Bennie Salazar well into his career while, "Ask Me If I Care," the following story, turns back the clock to when Bennie and his friends were in a punk band together as young adults. Egan's fluid prose and expert handling of perspective keep these differing periods, these differing episodes, from diverging too far from what connects them. This is how, despite the great gaps in time, place, and perspective, the book ends up as one cohesive novel and a Pulitzer-prize winning novel at that.

While I began reading *A Visit from the Goon Squad* well after I was knee-deep in the world of Suzanna, Georgia, and Itsuki, the character dynamics, overarching themes, and general structure of Egan's novel quickly became an object of my admiration and fascination. It's become a model, not one to merely imitate but one to muse towards, infusing my own

narrative style and sense of craft on the journey to grapple with similar cultural currents in similarly nontraditional ways. *A Visit for the Goon Squad* has been the focus of a great deal of my recent creative interest and scholarship and is situated at the forefront of this body of literature for that reason.

Tommy Orange's *There There* does not demonstrate as much kinship with my work and artistic direction but has remained an influential work since my first reading, particularly as it pertains to the crafting of character and polyvocal storytelling. The novel is, like Egan's, composed of various episodes that, in contrast to Egan, ambles toward a central climax and conclusion as this cast of Native Americans assembles at a pow wow in Oakland, California. The meat of the story is, then, *on the way*. Orange takes his time on that journey to carefully flesh out the fear, desire, love, hate, anger, and joy of each character, focusing so deeply on characters, their perspectives, and their psychologies that each chapter is titled with the name of the person whose perspective is that chapter's focus. It is *There There*'s fantastic attention to small moments of character across a wide range of perspectives that has remained with me and, thus, forged its place into my thesis.

The final novel is distant from my own style but, still, Susan Minot's *Monkeys* paints an episodic portrait of the Vincent family with an ease, grace, and impact that demands to be discussed. The story centers on the relationships among the nine members of this family, with particular focus on the death of the mother later in the novel and the ways in which each family member processes or does not process that grief and sorrow. What interests me about *Monkeys* is not necessarily the organization of the episodes, as they proceed sequentially, or really in the crafting of characters, as they are finely written but not as fine as in Orange or Egan, but in the portrayal of a family that grows, changes, and stalls *over time*. The varying dimensions and expressions of that progress are sketched so believably that to cry, laugh, yell

in anguish for the Vincents is instinctual. Minot's novel has become my touchstone in writing about family and, in particular, writing the sibling dynamics in "Suppertime".

The remaining two books are not works of fiction, but nonfiction books on the craft of narrative itself. Jerome Stern's *Making Shapely Fiction* is an exhaustive and enlightening coverage of common story structures and the laundry list of elements that comprise them. It's an incredible encyclopedia on the basic bones and esoteric abstracts of story production and has served as a pseudo-instruction manual for me for years now. The second book on craft is a collection of essays published by Tin House, *The Writing's Notebook*. Though, yes, it is an oft-handed-out book to introductory English literature students and, indeed, a book handed to me as an introductory English literature student, it contains several essays that grant wisdom and direction on the nature of narrative craft, particularly Dorothy Allison's essay "Place" and Anna Keesey's essay "Making a Scene: Fiction's Fundamental Unit".

Several specific short works have played significant roles in my rearing as a student writer. Jumpa Lahiri's short stories, "Interpreter of Maladies," and "A Temporary Matter," have served as persistent inspirations for the way that this form and, indeed, fiction general can reveal the raw, intimate, unsavory parts of the human experience. George Saunders' "Escape from Spiderhead," a very strange short story with several unconventional structural aspects, has served as a model for the merging of inner worlds with outer ones, as is touched on in the analysis of "Eureka Station". Robert Boswell's "Narrative Spandrels" remains perhaps the most influential craft essay I've read, voicing many aspects of my approach to narrative that I once felt were obtuse and informing the development and validation of my creative process into the present. These minor works, in combination with the major novels mentioned previously, have provided me fertile ground to grow as a student writer and will continue to provide fertile ground for discussion and dissection of the stories in this thesis.

On Macrostructures

Before delving into the topic itself, I want to differentiate between my usage of the term *macrostructure*, as written here, and the term *structure*, as I will discuss in the later story dissections. *Structure* refers to the design, shape, and movement of an individual story; a single narrative's *structure* might be divided into two halves or three acts and involve few or several or countless scenes. *Macrostructure* refers to the overall design shape, and movement that is accumulated by a collection of structures. This is, perhaps appropriately, an unwieldy word to denote. Whereas an individual structure necessarily *is* the summation of its parts, this scene here and that scene there, this tension rising and that one falling, the overarching macrostructure is *not* the summation of its parts, because it is not enough to say this story here and that story there, this story with a sad ending and that story with a happy one. It's about *both* the inner workings of a story as well as how that structure relates to, changes, impacts, and builds upon the structures of other narratives.

So, while a book, for instance, might be composed of many bipartite stories, a handful of tripartite stories, and a smattering of flash pieces with little sense of structure at all, that is not exactly the *macrostructure*. The *macrostructure*, as I mean it, considers the relationship of one story's structure to the next, to the next, and so on. Are all the bipartite stories clustered together? If so, why? Or are the bipartite stories interlaced with the tripartite ones, with a flash piece jammed in the gaps every so often? If so, why? These are just examples, as a story's structure is more than just, *is it two acts, three acts, or no acts?*, but I think the hypothetical questions probe toward what I mean by macrostructure.

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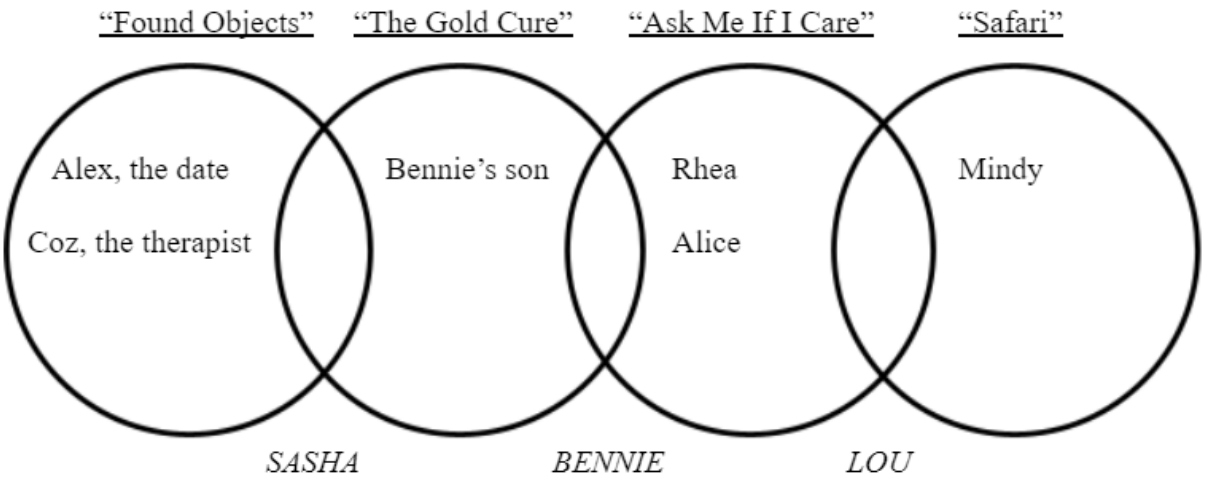
The exact outcome of a macrostructural analysis can be crystallized by comparing how Jennifer Egan uses character presence to connect the first four stories of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* against how character presence connects the four stories I've presented.

In “Found Objects,” Egan’s opening narrative, she employs an intimate third person perspective to follow Sasha, one of the novel’s major characters, as she goes on a date and then takes that date back to her apartment. The story’s voice is pressed completely against Sasha’s, using free indirect discourse to emphasize the closeness with which the third-person is being used. Ergo: there’s no doubt that “Found Objects” is a Sasha-centered story. In the next story, “The Gold Cure,” the point of view remains in third-person but refocuses on Bennie Salazar, Sasha’s boss and the arguable nexus of the novel as a whole. While “The Gold Cure” is a Bennie-centered story, Sasha *is* still present, just less so. The perspective has shifted away from her, but she’s not yet gone. By the following story, “Ask Me If I Care,” she *is* gone, but Bennie, interestingly, is not. He remains in a minor role while the narrative turns its attention to the first-person perspective of Rhea as she gets to know and becomes intrigued by Lou, a record producer and verifiable creep. And then Rhea disappears as the novel hands the limelight to Lou, his girlfriend Mindy, and their family in “Safari”.

This process of a character appearing, then fading, and finally disappearing from one story to the next can be referred to as *sequential connectivity*. By sharing characters across adjacent narratives, Egan joins story (A) to story (B), story (B) to story (C), story (C) to Story (D), and so on, until clusters of stories are strung together like rings on the same chain. I’ve visualized this particular macrostructure as shown below:



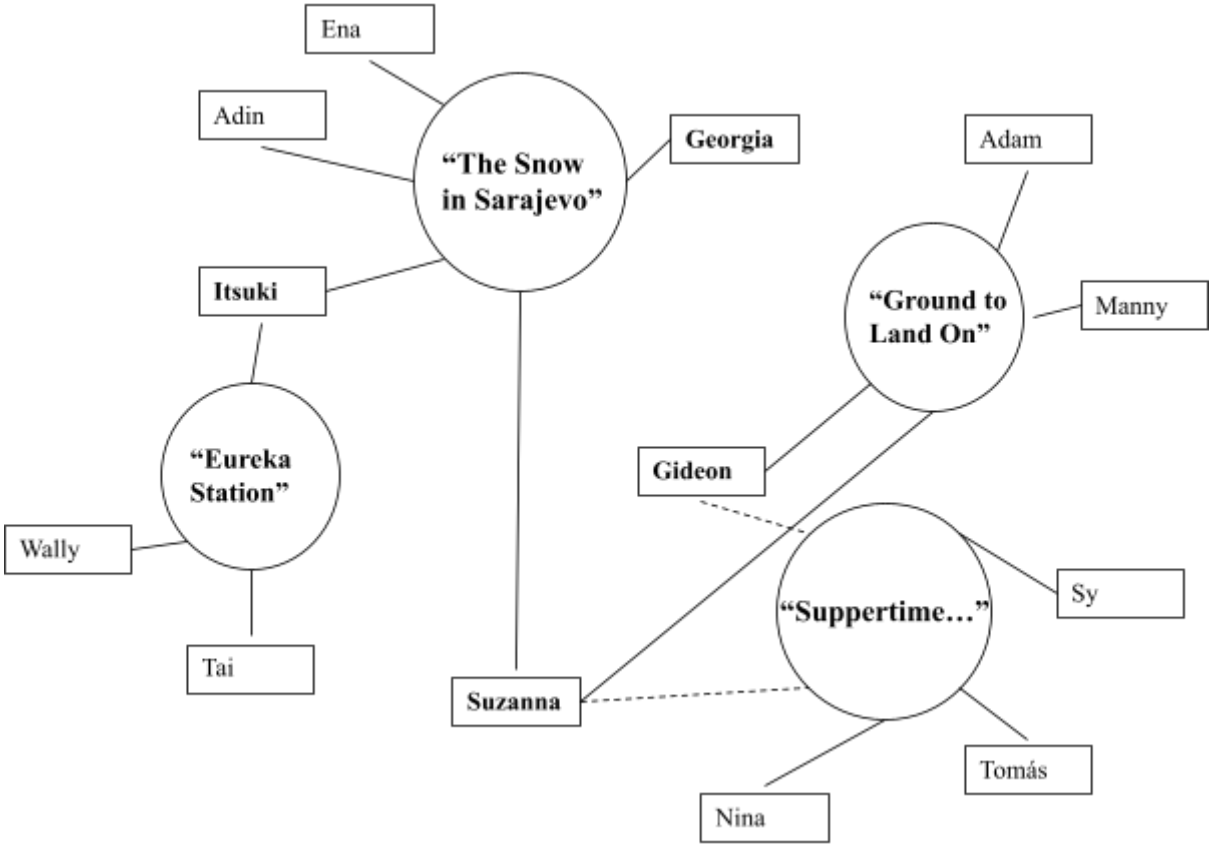
Each story, each ring, contains its own set of unique characters, Alex and Coz in "Found Objects," Rhea and Alice in "Ask Me If I Care", with a single significant character shared between stories that border one another. Sasha links the first two, Bennie the middle two, and Lou the last two. This consistent passing of the torch generates a sense of fluid movement in the novel so that the disparate episodes end up seamlessly linked together, even as they crisscross across the novel's lengthy timeline. The success of the narrative as a single body of work relies upon the development of that sequential connectivity into the narrative link macrostructure I've outlined.

In carrying this analysis to my quartet, it's evident that its macrostructure operates similarly to Egan's, but achieves an altogether different result. "The Snow in Sarajevo" is told from Georgia's first-person perspective, but it's not exactly a Georgia-focused story. It is as much about Georgia as it is about Suzanna and Itsuki's relationship with Georgia, so the story relies upon the presence of those *specific* characters in a way that "Found Objects" does not necessitate in the 'relationship' between Sasha and Alex. "Ground to Land On", instead of focusing on Suzanna or Itsuki as we might expect in an Egan-like sequential connection, flips the script and introduces Gideon as its main character. Suzanna has a presence in that story but is not in the limelight. And in "Eureka Station," Suzanna disappears entirely, along with Georgia, Gideon, and everyone else besides Itsuki and the two people he interacts with in the Nunavutan village. "Suppertime…" further dissolves the crowd and concentrates on Nina, Tomás, and Sy whose parents, despite being Gideon and Suzanna themselves, are only present in mention and reference, present only by the shadow that their absence casts.

These four stories are, thus, clearly not linked by a sequential connectivity but what I'd call *tangled connectivity*. Whereas Egan's stories share characters in sequential order, my stories share characters and character perspectives among a cluster of stories in nonsequential order. This emphasizes the crisscrossing of character presence among several stories over the

sharing of those characters between adjacent stories. Consider Itsuki's presence in the quartet, for instance. He's a major character in "The Snow in Sarajevo," but disappears in "Ground to Land On," before becoming the focus of "Eureka Station" and vanishing altogether in "Suppertime…". He does not sequentially appear, fade, and disappear, but rather appears, vanishes, reappears as the focus, and vanishes again. Characters cannot be left alone in the kind of knitted connectivity I've used. They are necessarily yolked to being introduced, then killed, then reintroduced, then relegated to mere reference, before becoming the focus, disappearing, fading, reappearing, vanishing, getting resurrected, etc.

This system of up-and-down, wave-like character presence generates a macrostructure that resembles, as implied by the connections that bind it, an entangled whole:



This is a character-based macrostructure just like Egan's but, one that is much more concerned with self-entanglement and self-reflexivity. The sequential connectivity present in the first four stories of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* necessarily prioritize particular story

capsules, that is the individual story-boxes, the episodes, that compose the novel, while the entangled connectivity present in my four stories prioritize the overall effect of character presence, even as that complicates and intertwines clusters of story-boxes.

The model that this analysis has yielded is no surprise for me, as I intended to produce the kind of entangled macrostructure that the figure above depicts. I intended to generate a web of stories whose nodes, like the circles, could stand on their own but whose connectivity, overlap, and self-reflexivity would produce a more meaningful, impactful whole than I felt emerged from Egan's macrostructure. I've posed that comparison in the following question: *are my stories songs on an album or pieces of a puzzle?* Personally, I think Egan's novel, however fresh and new, is mostly the former, a collection of interconnected songs on the same (Pulitzer-prize winning) album. I aim toward producing the latter, toward building the puzzle, toward knitting threads of character, setting, and theme into a true narrative gestalt.

On Theme

Theme is a notoriously elusive aspect of narrative craft. A work that purposefully dedicates itself to a theme— *love conquers all*, *money can't buy happiness*, other lies— might sacrifice the strength of the narrative in service of the perceived strength of its theme. Or, more simply, thinking too much about it will kill it. Accordingly, my creative process is not overly focused on theme. I, in fact, try to ignore the part of my brain that demands I write about a particular idea and instead listen to the part that demands I write about a particular *story*. I find that, for me at least, good themes emerge from good stories and that it rarely works in the opposite direction. It is, thus, only on the backend, upon retrospection, that I can ascertain the thematic landscape of any of my stories.

The thematic texture of this cluster is, I think, two-sided. On one edge of that blade, each major character in the ensemble is forced to confront dissolution in one form or another, confront that foundations are not as solid as previously thought, that what is Good and True and Constant is *not* Good and True and Constant. The cancellation of Gideon Hatch's show in "Ground to Land On" is perhaps the most obvious instance of this personal unbecoming. He's not just losing a job, as might be the case for Manny, Hannah, Adam, and the whole unseen cast and crew of *Pope*, but losing an identity. The job which has been the ever-present locator of his personality and passion is unexpectedly ripped out from under him. This immediate devastation induces him on a strange, empty day that ends with him thinking about pillow feathers flying in a thousand directions and all the other ways that things could've unfolded, giving credence again to this overarching dissolution.

Ena's disappearance in "The Snow in Sarajevo" is another instance of this personal unbecoming. The tranquil domesticity of her and Adin's home, the home they've opened up to Suzanna, Georgia, and Itsuki for the season, is shattered when she runs away, dissolving a previously stable environment into one of uncertainty and conspiracy, as, of course, it's never

quite understood why she left in the first place. The personal loss in "Eureka Station" is the very heart of that story. Itsuki is at the edge of the world, alone, obsessed, and with no clear path back; he's married to whatever end he finds in that town. And that end is one of intense paranoia and probable death. Siblings grow apart in the lonely world of "Suppertime…", as their parents are quite literally nowhere to be seen. Again and again, the characters in these stories are inundated with loss, with sudden disillusionment, with the feathering of previously taught tapestries.

The other edge of this thematic sword is the systematic dissolution of the greater story world. In "Suppertime…," for instance, it is autumn, the season of dying leaves, of wilting flowers, of the world closing up shop for the onset of winter; that itself is a very clear albeit banal indication of things falling apart. That falling apart is quite literal in "Eureka Station," however, as Itsuki remarks on the effects that climate change has had on the region:

> "... the last couple decades had made living in these remote regions more dangerous than usual. Storms were more common…Whole islands disappeared into the sea. Freighters took advantage of the new channels and crowded them in the summer… polar bears paddling against the wake…walrus heads on the snowshore" (51).

This description is not just a bland reminder of the crisis cascading across the globe presently, but a heavily dramatized, poeticized version of it. It's an apocalypse more interested in its existence as an aspect of narrative than its existence as a gritty representation of reality.

This environmental dissolution interacts with and reflects the internal dissolution of Gideon, Ena, and others and, in combination with it, generates a thematic landscape that is primarily dominated by an omnipresent unravelling. It's not merely that people are losing their jobs, running away from their homes, but that the ground itself is unstable, that the ice caps will melt and flood the cities of stability, both metaphorical and literal, regardless of the seawalls that are built, of the walls that are built between the rich and the poor, the closed-off and the eternally open. The narrative tension, the narrative interest, becomes, then, centered on how we act, love, hate, live in the meantime, in the hours before we're drowned.

Structure and Time in "The Snow in Sarajevo"

I've chosen to discuss structure and time in the quartet's opening story because of its nontraditional and, more specifically, nonlinear narrative structure. It develops across three distinct time periods: (I) earliest, in Bosnia, in the present action, as the trio search for Ena in the snowy streets of Sarajevo; (II) a decade or so later, in Philadelphia, at a dinner where they discuss the trip; and (III) much later, in the unspecified location and time from which Georgia has been narrating the whole story. These periods are not presented in sequential order, but in an interwoven pattern that bounces back and forth between them. As a general analysis of this structure could get unwieldy, I want to focus on how the prose of each time period employs scene versus summary and how the variation in their usages generates a structure that characterizes Georgia and her recall of the events.

By my estimation, there are about five pages that aren't concentrated either in the present action of the day they search for Ena or on some commentary of Georgia's about the day itself, meaning that almost the entire narrative takes place in period (I), the present action in Sarajevo. It is the story's status quo, its baseline, the foundation that it will return to again and again (before it is ultimately abandoned in those last couple pages). A vast majority of this foundation is composed of 'scene,' what Anna Keesey defines as the parts of a narrative where "story time is equal to discourse time" (138). Story time here is simply the time that ticks in the story-world, the actual seconds that are seen, unseen, implied, etc, and discourse time is the real-world time that an author takes to relay the story time. When the time it takes to detail an event is equal to the time it takes for that event to occur, that is *scene*. Scenes show, detail, describe, unveil the vibrant beats of a story as they transpire on the page.

It's significant, then, that, even though several decades have passed by the time Georgia narrates these events to us, she can still recall them in *scene*, in a way that equates story time, the events in her memory, with discourse time, the way that she recalls them. Her

memory might be twisting details, shading the trip with a romantic lens, but, still, she feels that what she's saying is true, that it is *the* truth, and that her details and descriptions are accurate and important. There are some gaps in the memory, some instances of *from what I can remember* and *to the best of my recollection*, but the omnipresence of scene dissolves those quibbles into obscurity. By the time that we could begin to question Georgia's take on the events, we're already in them, dragged along by the "present" action of period (I).

Period (II), however, is divided halfway down the middle between scene, when story time *equals* discourse time, and summary, when "story time is greater than discourse time" (Keesey 138). During the first shift from period (I) to period (II), which takes place at the bottom of page four, we're in summary. Georgia *tells* us that they met at a bar, but says nothing about the bar, the events that led them to get together at that location, and even as they "talked more about [the trip]", she does not provide us the actual words, only the fact that there were, indeed, words said. When there *are* instances of scene in this period, they're just small snippets, like the one on page 17. Period (II) briefly intrudes into the past, into the first period, and then is gone again, like the intrusion of a movie's narrator into the current scene before their smiling face disappears behind the edge of the television screen. Almost all of period (II), less for the section at the end, functions in this way.

The dinner with which this period is solely concerned is a way for Georgia's narration to include the older perspectives of Suzanna and Itsuki on the events that occur in period (I). It'd be a quite different story, with a quite different meaning, if Georgia was the only source of retrospection, if we were left to her storytelling devices and her storytelling devices alone. But we aren't. Itsuki and Suzanna express the same worry, concern, confusion, and sadness about Ena's disappearance that Georgia does. That dinner, for all intents and purposes, seems like a good time between old friends, despite the slightly unsavory subject matter that comes up as they eat. And then comes period (III).

At the last moment, in the story's last paragraph, Georgia pulls back the pretext of her narration and reorients it in her home, in her head. She seeks prophecies from the imaginary Ena that can read the future of their group from the grooves of her protractor. She seeks validation that it's okay she's become so concentrated on these events, that the memory of these three people together on this day plays on a loop in the theater of her mind. It's in this moment, I think, that the reasons for the structure become clearer. She's telling this story to herself as much as she's telling it to 'us', relaying it like a self-soothing medicine. The way that instances of period (II) puncture period (I) reflects how the future punctures the past in Georgia's memory. She can't help but think of the distance between herself, Itsuki, and Suzanna when she thinks about their time together in Sarajevo. She can't help but bend time backward and forward, crisscrossing itself, overlapping memory with presence and prophecy.

This story's structure insists that the past, present, and future do not exist as separate entities aligned in a determinate order. It insists that Georgia's life has not been, is not presently, and will never be just a series of events, a collection of things happening next to one another, but that her experiences are an echo chamber that reverberates a decades-old trip to a small Balkan nation across the rest of her life and "fills [her] quiet house in Philadelphia with [its] memories" (24). The structure of this story, the interaction and reflection between its three periods, *is* the story. The form that it is told within is a reflection of Georgia, who is telling it, and of the experience of the events, whose impact cascades across all her life. This story could not be told in one time, in one period. It would be wholly incomplete.

This was, all things considered, a happy accident, one of those emergent properties of my creative process as I talked about in *On Theme*. I didn't intend to write a nonlinear story that bent time across itself, but I *did* intend to write a story from Georgia's perspective, about Georgia's experience of her time in Sarajevo, of this phase of the trio's friendship, and of the ripples that still linger from it. Everything else, including the structure, followed my lead.

I want to cite “Safari,” from *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, in a brief coda here at the end of this analysis, because, in the short story’s last few pages, Egan makes a move similar to the one I have just dissected. At the story’s close, the narration jumps forward and, one by one, tells the future of each major character, describing how they’ll marry or not marry, be happy or not be happy, live long or, as Lou’s son does, commit suicide at twenty-eight (Egan 80-83). This jump, like Georgia’s entrance into period (III), recontextualizes the story, casts the happy events of the present action in a different and altogether more dismal light. The romanticism of a safari with the family, though a romanticism full of neocolonial overtones, falls away, as the gruesome futures of its members are bluntly described one after another after another. While “Safari” does not crisscross time in the same way that “Sarajevo” does, the effects that are achieved by their endings are, I hope, similar.

Dialogue and Texture in "Ground to Land On"

As this story follows an actor and is half-located on the set of a television show, I wanted to infuse its narrative character with a kind of wit that might not be quite present and would not quite fit within the other three parts of the quartet. Gideon's character is, in itself, an effort toward this effect. His seeming inability to reconcile the relative shallowness and unimportance of his show— see "they got a couple of People's Choice Awards" at the bottom of 25— with the extraordinary and incongruent passion and importance he places into it— see a "hundred little notebooks" at the top of 25 and "the more he kicked" in the middle of 32— is funny. It is sad, in a way, but also funny. I wanted to demonstrate that humor, that half-empty, half-funny feeling, through the dialogue and develop that personality into an overall texture of the story, a defining feature of its narrative vehicle.

Dialogue is, generally speaking, pretty misunderstood. As Jerome Stern notes, writers are usually taught to approach dialogue as "what your characters say", which seems logical, but that it's more useful and more truthful to approach it as all the things that "your characters don't say" (114). Not only does the latter form more closely resemble our lived experience, but it makes for more interesting stories, too. People talking past one another, arguing without arguing, stifling anger and resentment as they run into one another at a coffee shop. In that vein, consider the following section from "Ground to Land On":

> "You like Sugar Ray?" Suzanna asked.
> He shrugged. "I don't know, really."
> "They're like that, yeah. Oh, thank you again for the reservations."
> He nodded. "Of course. I'm happy to, always."
> "I've never had Mongolian food, you know. What's it like?" (35).

I intended for this short exchange, which occurs as Suzanna and Gideon drive to their dinner date, as a quick characterization of their relationship. The words that are actually said, the words within the dialogue tags, are very short. The sentences never exceed more than a handful of words: "You like Sugar Ray?", "I don't know", "They're like that", giving it a

pace that is almost unnaturally quick. This is meant, first, to mirror the story-world, the world of an actor, as the dialogue pace of many popular shows follows that kind of short, quippy format, but, secondly, to emphasize the brevity itself. When people talk like this, if they do, it's usually because there's not much more to say, *or* there's a lot more to say and neither party is willing to start. Because Suzanna gives that exchange its agency, its personality, indeed mentioning Sugar Ray, the reservations, the Mongolian food, and asking not one but two questions, it seems, I hope, that Gideon is falling into that latter category, as someone who has more to say but is unwilling to start talking. A reader could ascertain this further with the knowledge that he is *just* coming off from the news of the cancellation.

The dimension of the dialogue to be talking-without-really-talking continues when the couple arrives at the restaurant. Suzanna notices, as the smart woman she is, that something's up. She even probes the issue, saying that he's "a man of few words, but never this few", but Gideon won't budge, he lies that it was just one of those days on set, that it's nothing but the minor inconvenience of a workweek (36). And, on the next page, that brevity and quickness returns with: "Oh really?", "Oh yeah," "Mm.", "Right, right.", a series of two-word phrases that denote virtually nothing. They're saying nothing and yet, in doing so, they prove that "dialogue can be silence" and express more in that silence than they ever could in long, explicit monologues about their fears and hopes and regrets (Stern 120). And still, there's something funny about it, something about the breakneck speed with which these little exchanges begin and end. It's unnatural, more like a stage play than real life.

The particular "vocabulary" and "density of detail" of these passages develop what Stern calls texture, a specific "aspect of style" that gives the story a certain ineffable *feeling* (239). The work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, for instance, is characterized by a verbose level of detail and a high diction, giving his work a densely packed, aristocratic kind of texture, while Hemingway's stories are, in stark contrast, plainly-spoken, sparsely packed, and designed to

generate the empty and evocative texture that has become his narrative hallmark. In “Ground to Land On,” the dominance of dialogue on the page already pushes it toward Hemingway’s side of the spectrum. Dialogue, after all, takes up more space and usually uses less of that space than paragraphs of prose. An entire line of white space can be dedicated to the dialogue “Yes, no, wait,” just as well as it can be dedicated to the beginning of a Jamaica Kincaid sentence which will unspool down the page in one unbroken breath. Furthermore, the dialogue itself is relatively plain, with an emphasis on certain aspects of Gideon’s theater jargon, yes, but still with an otherwise common diction. There are not overly complicated soliloquies to decipher, no thou art or thine will. It’s just people talking and, well, talking-without-really-talking.

Because of how pared down the texture of this story is, how relatively unfull it is in comparison to “Eureka Station,” with its hallucinations and mythologies, or “Suppertime” with its intimate sensory details, the importance shifts from the lines on the page to the gaps and canyons between them, those white spaces between dialogue, in the parts of the story where no one, for once, is not talking. It becomes about, I think, the quiet moment that the story ends on, the several seconds of quietude when Gideon stands outside the Mongolian grill and lets his imagination wander. At this moment, he is not reaching back out to Olivia, or getting Manny a new job, or going back inside to talk more with Suzanna and bare more of his soul. No, he stands outside in the “blue haze of the evening” by himself and, as he has talked without talking, lives without really living, playing out the hundred ways that his life could have gone and, naturally, the hundred ways it will never go.

I intended to situate the texture of Gideon’s character and the texture of the story in the moments of silence that lie in between the long stretches of dialogue and hope that this conclusion, one of psychological white space, not only speaks to that desire but resonates as a necessary pause Gideon needs before going back to his half-empty, half-funny life.

Character and Place in "Eureka Station"

This story is, without a doubt, the paragon of Itsuki Yashima. I knew this when I started writing it, as I uncovered a man at the end of a globetrotting journey, a man whose disappearance is a major throughline in my conception of the greater novel, but I could've never predicted the kind of desolation and fervorous end that befalls him, or how he beckons that end, however unfortunate, upon himself. It is the personality of this person, his character, which I believe gives this story life and locates it at a particular 'place', and so I want to dedicate this section to uncovering his character as it unfolds during the course of the story and as it unfolded in my process of crafting it.

Perhaps the easiest way to do this is to track his mental state through the course of the story, through the few hours that the story covers. At the beginning, at his entry to the "little town in Nunavut," Itsuki seems peaceful, reserved, almost monkish, as his eyes drape over the scene and digest the quiet landscape in sharp detail. He notices the vine-like cables, the dog sleds turned upright nearby, the diesel engines far away "shaking ice loose from their buttons and dials". The prose is written with this level of specificity not to merely give the reader a deep sense of the setting, but to merge the third-person perspective of the narrative itself with Itsuki's experience. The reader comes to know Itsuki at the same time they come to know the landscape, creating an intimate connection between the two. The story urges us to see Itsuki as a keen and intelligent observer because of the keen and intelligent observation that is made in the first paragraph. And indeed, when Itsuki finally interacts with another human, Tai, that observational quality returns:

> "The man had a stout, round head, and it reminded Itsuki of the gnomes that sat in the garden beds outside Wheeler Hall… only a small brown rug of hair on his head, which was cut haphazardly into bangs at the front, thick choppy pieces that hung over his forehead like the tear-off tabs of a missing cat poster." (49)

While the particularity of this observation is appropriate for the story's style, it is one made with comparatively less elegance. In the opening pages, Itsuki's visual digestion of this

town is full of grace, beauty, tranquility, built up with a slow and cinematic panorama. When it comes to this moment, though, in his visual digestion of a person, that all falls away until he can only see Tai as a gnome with a bad haircut. That effect is achieved by heightening the pace of the delivery, ensuring that Itsuki's observations are blunt and matter-of-fact, whereas they were slow and flowing when they were about the setting. This implies and characterizes that, as smart an observer that he is, Itsuki lacks the social comfortability necessary for him to interact with and think about other people. That idea is furthered just down the page, as he tries to forget the gnome comparison for a moment in fear that, somehow, Tai will ask why he keeps imagining him in a "dunce hat" as if he can read Itsuki's mind.

While this might seem like an innocent moment of anxiety, it is only the first in a series of clues that denote a dark neuroticism boiling beneath Itsuki's otherwise monkish exterior. He feels that, later in the conversation, not only is Tai eyeing him but that Tai's *mustache* is eyeing him, too, that an inanimate line of hair on someone's face could somehow be watching him and judging him. This anxiety escalates into outright paranoia when Tai finally takes him to meet Wally. Itsuki feels "the sinews of his chest tighten like strings pulled across a violin" as Wally and Tai greet each other; he feels that he isn't in on some joke and that whatever it is that he's missing, it's something good (55).

This depiction of this inner psychological tension was modeled after and inspired by Tommy Orange's portrayal of Dene Oxendene in *There There*. When we meet Dene, he's preparing to meet with a grant committee that will decide whether or not he's given money to fund a film project. Dene is wracked with nervousness and anxiousness for the entire chapter, a worry that the grant committee will "know everything about him" and, thus, "hate him intimately… see how unqualified he is." (28). And then, just like Itsuki, his worry is revealed as an underlying, unrelenting paranoia:

"[Dene] smells piss and at first thinks it's him. He's always feared he'll found that

> he's smelled like piss and shit his whole life without knowing it, that everyone's been afraid to tell him, like Kevin Farley from the fifth grade who ended up killing himself the summer of their junior year in high school when he found out." (Orange 29).

This is the extreme underbelly of the social anxiety seen just a page before. And, notice, as the sentence goes on how, from phrase to phrase, the psychological state spirals. He fears that he's smelled like piss and shit his whole life and also that everyone knows that he smells like piss and shit and that no one's told him, just like what happened to that Kevin Farley kid who *killed himself*. Dene, in one sentence, just as he takes the train from one stop to the next, has landed on suicidal ideation. Thankfully, Dene gets the money, embarks on his storytelling project, and is able to overcome the anxiety that plagues him in these examples; Itsuki is, however, not so lucky.

He decides that not only is Wally *not* Vito Sacristán, the object of his search, but that Wally will not actually help him get to Eureka Station as he's promised. This paranoia-fueled impulse moves him to leave the warmth of the cabin and brace the stormy morning, to find the kayak, grab the extra pair of oars, and set out into the channel. As he paddles, the inner turmoil that he's been afflicted by the entire story becomes external as his awareness of the climate apocalypse resurfaces. The ice floating in the channel, unmoored from their glaciers, watches him just as Tai's mustache did. The walrus heads, which are not really there and the first sign of his hypothermia-induced hallucination, "[glare] from their disembodied position on the other beach." (67). Itsuki's psychology, in this moment, becomes fused with the environment around him, a reflection of his position at the metaphorical and literal end of the world. The interaction between the two generates what Dorothy Allison calls "place".

Place, Allison rushes to clarify, is *not* setting. It is not "what your feet are crossing to get somewhere" (Allison 8). Place is not just a diner, or a bar, club, house, apartment, kiosk, airplane terminal, city in Sarajevo, or Arctic research station. It's the involved feelings that the place has baked within it, and the involved feelings of the people that live, interact with,

and comprise that place: “Place is emotion” (Allison 9). It was my express intention to make the town, as well as Eureka Station itself (hallucination or not), not just settings but places. The emotions and hallucinations that rise out of Itsuki in the climax of the story become intimately interwoven with his experience of the setting. His loneliness, fear, anxiety, and paranoia, in a sense, *create* ‘Eureka Station’ as an idea, a feeling, an object of desire and obsession from the physical. Allison humorously posits the following examples as places in her own mind: “Central Florida is despair. New York City is sex. California is smug… Iowa City is one hotel room and a chlorine stink away from the suburbs of hell” (9).

I feel that Eureka Station *is* obsession. It is, for Itsuki, the abstract embodiment of his psychological attention. Eureka Station is also a failed mission. After all, it’s an abandoned research station, a facility with an explicit purpose that is no longer in use. The destination of Itsuki’s perilous trek across multiple continents, a trek that’s based only on his want to go on it, ends at a place that is already deserted, the location of his dreams vacant. Eureka Station is failure, is fruitless, is the graveyard of all well-intentioned zealots. I wanted to craft an ending and, truly, a whole story, where the character and the place were inseparable from one another, wherein the setting took on an almost mythic quality with its shifting dunes and eerie silence and frost-choked streets. I wanted to weave Itsuki’s last story or, at least, his last story in the chronology of the quartet, as a holistic expression of him, his life, the ferocity that empowered him in his youth, and the obsession that killed him in adulthood.

Sense and Meaning in "Suppertime or the Secret History of Nosebleeds"

This story became, both intentionally and unintentionally, a companion piece to "Eureka Station". While "Eureka" focuses solely on Itsuki, "Suppertime" balances Nina, Sy, and Tomás. "Eureka" tells the end of a life's unravelling, while "Suppertime" tells the subtle *beginning* of one. "Eureka" takes place in a cold, unforgiving story-world, and "Suppertime" burns the warm lamp oil of domesticity in abundance. This last dichotomy, the difference between the white world of Eureka Station and the warm world of the Álvarez house, became a central interest and, I think, one of the central cruxes of this narrative. Warmth is a sense, and so I'll be covering the ways in which sensory details in this story describe a particular two-side version of warmth, and how that unique definition of warmth became what Robert Boswell calls a "happy accident" or "narrative spandrel" (52).

Warmth gets life in the very first paragraph of this story. Nina, in some inner narration, details the establishment of the family's tradition of making escalivada at the onset of autumn. She explains that in the house that her mother (Suzanna) grew up in, the summers were too harsh to make escalivada, and so she and her mother, Nina's grandmother, had to wait until it was "cool enough". When I describe that heat of the summer, I use the phrase, "less the heat choked them to death," to first, add proper drama to the mythos of this family tradition and secondly, and more pressingly, to describe the precise constraint of heat, the burden it placed Nina's mother and grandmother. However, in just the next phrase, the unbearable weight of that heat becomes a sacrosanct warmth as the two "huddle together by the stovetop," as if it was a fireplace in the dead of winter. The heat that once stopped them from making the gorgeous food of their heritage is the same heat that allows them to do so when autumn comes, the same heat that exists in opposition to, as a savior against, the cold.

This is clearly generating a dual sense of warmth in the story, that which chokes the family in the summer *and* that which gives it life in the autumn, that which prevents the

creation of an important family dish *and* that which allows it to happen a few months later. What's interesting, and what Boswell's essay is all about, is that *I didn't intend to do that*. My idea behind the family tradition was merely to give it a reason *not* to be made during the summer, as I wanted the story to take place during the fall, purely for the aesthetics of being able to talk about leaves falling, pretty New England trees, etc. The warmth of summer and the way that warmth becomes a different kind of warmth in winter was originally a purely utilitarian solution for an aesthetic problem. And then the idea kept reappearing.

First, as Nina and Tomás begin their game of mancala in the den, she remarks that the "warmth of the oven swallowed [them] and insulated the room". There's something very nice and also very constraining about this description. Insulation is, of course, good, both in the literal sense that it fills the walls in our homes and keeps what we want in, in, and what we want out, out, but also in a connotative sense. Insulation from evil, insulation from violence, insulation from the bad, bad world beyond the door. Swallowed, the verb that precedes it, gives a different meaning. Who *wants* to be swallowed, consumed, eaten? It's a word that is not quite as harsh as choked but still creates the same claustrophobic feeling. There are rare cases in human life when being swallowed by something is a good thing. Winning the lottery and being swallowed by a pile of cash would be nice, for instance. Regardless, the warmth again appears in two senses: as that which swallows Nina and Tomás, but also that which insulates them. And, again, I didn't mean to do this.

Later, while Nina checks on the escalivada about halfway through its cooking time, she worries that, on one hand, the low heat of the oven will not cook them in time and that, thus, the oil on the vegetables will soak them and turn them into mush, but worries, *on the other hand*, that turning up the heat will burn and ruin them. In the argument with Tomás on page eighty, she finally feels a gust of confidence to stand up to him and says that her "voice pushed through the dirt of [her] throat like a weed in the heat of August." The fact that she is

speaking her mind to Tomás, who so often seems to dominate conversations, is a good thing, but the description of it as *a weed in the heat of August* implies something unruly, unkempt, unwanted about it. Weeds survive and die by heat, but are viewed as pests all the same.

This recurring, accidental, and inescapable motif, the kind that takes on meanings never intended for it, is a main facet of Robert Boswell's "narrative spandrels". They are the "by-products" of utilitarian storytelling devices that may first arrive in the background before suddenly, unexpectedly becoming members of the foreground (Boswell 51-53). The heat of the summer, the warmth of the oven, Nina's internal squabble of the degrees necessary to cook escalivada just right, were all incidents of the background on my first draft. Heat is an unavoidable process of cooking, and the fact that escalivada is a temperamental dish that can be ruined by subtle changes in heat was, obviously, not a story decision. And I didn't choose escalivada because I knew it had that particular cooking process. It was merely in a list of typical Catalan dishes online and, as Suzanna's parents have varying but significant degrees of Catalan heritage, I, on a whim, chose the dish. See this chain of decisions— first to have a family cooking the dish, to have the family cook a dish of their heritage, for that heritage to be Catalan, for that Catalan dish to be escalivada, for escalivada to have specific requirements of heat, to also be a dish characterized by ash and roasted spice— result in the following:

In the last movement of this story, Nina finishes the family tradition by herself. She cuts open the vegetables, lays out their slices, adds final seasonings, and, then, as Sy and Tomás play tennis, she picks up a pile of the savory dish and eats it. Warmth and heat and ash and spice swallow her, invade her, consume her, burn her, comfort her, singe the flesh of her tongue with the memory of her Abuela. *This* is the story's final image, the last narrative motion that it has to offer, and it's focused on heat, on the way that heat is multidimensional, spectral, unable to be easily defined on feeling or utility alone. And, all the while, she's having the experience of warmth alone, feeling the vegetable slices fall apart in her hands.

It is no secret that the dish has transformed into a stand-in for the family. The heat which cooked it, forged it, and endangered the dish is the same pressures which cook, forge, and endanger families. The comparison is simple, but it was only rendered as a by-product of numerous decisions that each could have very well gone the other way. And yet, what has emerged from it is the heart of this story, the warmth and heat of the Álvarez family, the domesticity which it clings to and is also losing all in one breath, that which chokes and frees, that which swallows and insulates, that which burns and soothes. The shape of the story, the motions that composed it, were defined, in some sense, from the moment I chose to write it. The story's meaning is not an incidental outcome that can just be rearranged in the revision process. It's an integral part that, pardon the pun, was baked in from the beginning.

Review and Conclusion

There are, just like Gideon's life, a hundred other ways that this thesis could have unfolded. Many analytical angles and critical lenses could be used to further understand these four stories, to configure them in new ways, so the ones that appear in this thesis are merely the ones that I felt deserved to be the focus of primary discussion, the filters of dissection that felt most relevant to me. I'm providing, then, a conscious awareness that this thesis is *not* a totalistic, end-all, be-all take on narrative craft as an art, or narrative craft as it applies to me personally. Thankfully, both the greater art form and my take on it will change, morph, and, hopefully, grow better with time and experience.

These pages are only meant to represent and unfurl a particular group of craft elements that I have developed and honed since coming to the university almost four years ago and the relevance of those elements as they appear in the stories I have spent nearly half that time developing. I set out to demonstrate a deep understanding of story production, to illuminate the decisions and reasons behind narrative movements made in my stories, so I hope that, by this conclusion, the nature of my approach to story has been crystallized and that this nature seems well-informed and well-trained, that it is a nature not merely abstract, esoteric, and artistic but that it is concrete, particular, and reasoned, that it is the strange and accidental emergent property of these two dimensions.

The pursuit of story should always be in the direction of better storytelling. Narrative craft and the half-art, half-academic approach I've taken do, I think, move in the direction of better storytelling and have moved me closer and closer to the writer I want to be, to writing the kind of stories I want to write. This narrative form is not quite about getting to that place, to Eureka Station, but rather about revelling in the process that it takes to get there, to find joy in it and to grow from dissecting dissections and analyzing analyses. It's my hope that this thesis is a stepping stone on my long path toward being a better storyteller and writer.

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