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The Museum

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The Museum

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Julie Jarema

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
May 2016

For Mom, Dad, Sarah, the puppy chickens,
the Chill group, and the friends who have become family

Introduction

To the Reader:

You have in your hands what might be considered the missing piece to the story. I would mostly like you to pretend that I'm not here and that my background is irrelevant to meaning of the story. Roland Barthes says, "it is language which speaks, not the author" in "The Death of the Author," which has greatly influenced this project; accordingly, I would like the work to stand on its own. But I am overriding my hesitance in order to tell you the origins of this story.

Like the protagonist of this piece, I was born in Suzhou, China, and then adopted at six months with eight other girls. I am the youngest of this group, so it came as a surprise when my cousin closest in age to me (older by only a couple of months) announced that she was pregnant. When her son was born, she made an interesting comment that she was seeing herself for the first time in another person. Instead of looking up to our parents to see what we will become, she is looking down at her son, seeing what she once was and her future at the same time.

My background, evidently, puts me in a unique situation. On one hand, I feel the responsibility to create diverse characters, to dispel stereotypes and expand representation for readers like me. On the other hand, I have not had a typically Chinese-American upbringing, so I don't feel like I can lend my voice to that experience. The resulting compromise has led me to explore my own cultural identity through writing this senior project.

The summer before senior year, I visited Mmuseumm in Manhattan, which inspired the idea of the Museum of L'origine. Mmuseumm was converted from an old freight elevator and displays curated miscellany that rotates annually. Items are viewable 24/7 through glass windowpanes, and viewers can listen to an audio guide by calling a toll-free number. The city has been a major part of my college career; I spent two years at NYU before coming to Bard

College. Moving to New York seemed impossible when it was just a destination in my eighteen-year-old mind. The realization that I had the power to transform my life into something so vastly different perhaps imbued the city with a bit of magic for me, even though I also had to quickly adapt and grow up at much faster rate in that new setting. Since this project is supposed to be a culmination of the past four years, it seemed only fitting that New York City would play such a large role, full of its bizarre possibilities.

I, inevitably, spent my first year in the city as a tourist. I hit all the big stops—Times Square, Rockefeller Center, the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade route. But I experienced the everyday and familiarized myself with my new surroundings through very long walks over bridges and through museums. If I needed to take a break, I would sit down on a bench or in a bookstore and doodle the interesting people I observed. Whenever anyone plans on visiting New York and asks me what they should do, I rarely have a good answer because I spent the majority of my time in such a transient way, only capturing fleeting instances through my scribbles. Going outside and passing through the various neighborhoods on foot has led me to find performers in swimsuits dancing with rubber chickens, a man golfing milk cartons between buildings, dogs carrying their owners' coffee cups, a person in a pink gorilla suit playing the cello in a subway station. And this was just during freshman orientation week.

Despite leaving the city, things fortunately remained at the same level of wonderfully strange when I found myself in middle of rural upstate New York standing in front of a futuristic metal building, questioning my life choices, yet again, as my mom drove away. Bard has provided an endless supply of inspiration in my two years here that helped me to establish the atmosphere of my project. In my short time here, I've heard about intrusive clowns running through the forest; trudged through the Blithewood garden with snow above my knees; briefly

joined the aerialists in the Surrealist Training Circus; and spent too much time in a dusty, unlit basement while attempting to piece together a bicycle from limited parts with the Bike Co-Op.

More recently, this project seemed to truly seep into my reality—a parallel instance of what happens in the story happened to me when my adviser, Porochista Khakpour, told me to meet her at the NYU Medical Concussion Center. Due to a series of unfortunate health issues, Porochista had to take a leave of absence midway through the semester. By chance, the timing worked out for us to meet in person because I would be in the city for a job interview at the same time she had therapy. I found myself running through midtown, across the avenues, passing businesspeople in suits and European tourists to meet with my own physically absent author hidden in the sea of wheelchairs and canes. This project has absorbed and embellished reality before expelling it once again, guiding me instead of the other way around.

Besides the city, my time at college has been shaped and influenced by my French studies. My interests in the flâneur, surrealism, absurdity, impressionism, and modernism converged to manifest themselves in this project. The authors and works I have studied have affected my writing, from the Baudelairean fallenness to the Mallarméan play with the surface of words. Georges Perec's lists of everyday life and the categorization within Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* have attuned my attention to minute details. In addition to these French and French-influenced writers, Kelly Link's works and her ability to craft fantastically unconventional stories encouraged me to experiment more with odd structures of narration. I'm greatly indebted to Italo Calvino, who ignited the spark for my project and provided a convoluted relationship between an author and a reader that tied my ideas together, as seen in the epigraph. There is a more comprehensive bibliography at the end—from books that have stuck from

childhood and have become a part of me to the books that were recommended at the end of junior year—to highlight the long list of authors and artworks that have served this project.

The Museum has provided a place for me to explore my identity and recreate the absurdity that I'm lucky enough to find in the everyday. But of course, above all else, this is a work of fiction. And though this gives more insight into its creation and the process I went about to conjure up this story, it is up to you, the Reader, to take action, explore, and reassemble the words and pieces I've left to make *The Museum* come to life.



—J.Y.J

“The writer who is not writing trains his spyglass on the one who is writing.” –Italo Calvino, *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*

The alleyway goes unvisited most days of the year. It has the same gritty texture of all alleyways, from the layers of graffiti and the mysterious dripping that always comes from some unidentifiable origin. It has cold metal sheets for doors and the occasional scampering rat.

Rarely do people travel down this alley, as it is ill-lit and dank as a sewer. But she passed each day, with her dark hair shading her face, usually carrying a bundle of rags in her arms. This must have been a shortcut for her. Until one day, she paused. The few people that have passed by over the years tended to pause at garage door number seventeen at the precise moment they think that they see something out of the corner of their eye, a light flickering, a hand waving. They quickly assure themselves that they are just imagining things and keep moving along, carrying on with the quotidian tasks of their lives. It was impossible to tell what made her stop and turn around again, to allow her gaze to linger for a moment longer than usual at door number seventeen.

It was probably the rare glint of sunlight sparking and reflecting off the interior that caught her eye that made her come closer, lean in towards the heavy door, and notice the two slits carved out like the vacant eyes of a jack-o-lantern to make space for narrow windows. There was a single dark and cold incandescent bulb hanging from a string inside of the metal box. The sunlight hitting the glass from the outside highlighted her wide forehead, the shadows making the caves that pooled beneath her eyes deeper. She avoided her reflection in the window by looking right through herself. She squinted at the orange glint of sunlight bouncing off the objects inside the garage, the light source confusing her vision. Everything inside starkly

contrasted—points of illumination that were too bright to look at and surrounding pitch darkness. She was too young to be holding a baby. She looked like a high school student, barely old enough to drive a car, yet here she was, alone, in the rank passageway that held the unassuming room with windows just low enough for her to stand on tiptoe and peer inside.



WHEN YOU OPENED THIS BOOK, YOU EXPECTED TO FIND A MAP AND A KEY. I CAN GIVE YOU THE MAP. AS YOUR EYES SKIM ACROSS THE PAGE, MY WORDS RACE ACROSS YOUR MIND LIKE CLOUDS ACROSS THE VAST SKY. AND WHEN I RUN OUT OF IDEAS, YOU STOP TO EXAMINE THE BLANK REMAINDER OF THE PAGE, WONDERING WHERE I WAS GOING.



After a particularly bad week in a series of bad weeks, she took the shortcut home once again, though it made her uneasy every time. Despite the unsettled feeling at bringing her daughter down the narrow alley, she could not waste any more time getting home. Everything had gotten so hard recently after the unexpected bundle had come into her life, no larger than the size of a football. The season for playing games had long since passed, however. Besides she had never been one for sports. And of course the bundle was not a football but a baby.

Mia just wanted to sleep, to stop racing around everyday to either go to a terrible job or to go search for one. She wished, instead, to spend her days cradling her daughter in her arms in the comfort of her small but neat room. It was unlikely to happen, but she could dream. She was lucky the baby was not fussy, silent and watchful from beneath her thick black lashes. She wrapped her daughter more tightly in the blankets. She could not keep living like this, on the meager allowance that her father deposited into her bank account, intended for groceries and

textbooks. But she could not seem to hold down a job, with her daughter needing attention every couple of hours. She also felt her own vitality being sapped as she gave up her time to perform menial tasks in exchange for a handful of dollars to buy diapers that would be gone in a week. She shifted the bundle onto her hip. The weather was long past the sticky and humid summer air, thickly permeated with the rotting stench of warm garbage on every corner. It had shifted into damp and chilly evenings as the city tilted into late fall. The brown leaves in the gutter crunched beneath her feet.

She wove down a series of streets and alleyways that looked alike, but when she walked past garage door number seventeen with her gaze straight ahead and the intention of passing by without a second glance, the light flickered on. There was no one inside. It was like the room had been waiting for her to come back and take a closer look. No one else was around to witness her display of curiosity as she stopped walking, turned back, hitched up the bundle, and looked around. She continued to scrunch up her forehead and look up and down the alley as she inched her way closer towards the windows. The narrow alley whistled as the wind passed through. When she leaned in to peer through the glass this time, the light on the end of the string revealed the objects inside:

- Street signs: HORSE XING. STOP. YIELD.
- Framed paintings with no visible signatures and chipped sculptures, eroded to the point where it was impossible to tell exactly what figures they were supposed to be.
- A bright blue windowpane, like the cloudless sky had stained the glass before being removed from a wall.
- Rows of matching hats and eyeglasses.

- Endless stacks of books: fairytales, lovely hardbound editions; cheap paperbacks with creased spines and curled pages; brand-new books with bright white pages; dog-eared yellowed pages that had come unbound. The invisible titles.
- A jar of silver, gold, and black keys.

All these items were placed on shelves made of mirrored glass, so it was disorienting to look around for too long. Each item was reflected in on itself until there was a stretch of repeated objects that expanded towards infinity. The vertical accordion of books sunk far down into the ground and traveled upwards into the seemingly cavernous ceiling. The letters of the signs were right and wrong, the words inside out and backwards so they were just strange squiggles. Mia felt disoriented by the clutter and the directional instability as she pulled her gaze outside. The world tried to right itself again. The garage somehow remained the same size, while her trust had shrunken.

Mia did not understand the collection of items, nor why they were on display, if this was even a display. She took a step back. Nailed to the brick wall next to the garage door, on a weathered wooden sign she had failed to notice the previous times she had passed, she could make out the faintest writing that said that this was a Museum of Lost Things. The sign was a beaten forest green, mostly chipped away to the dark pulpy wood underneath. The spiraled writing was a light yellow, carefully painted with flourish.

She gave a curious tug at the garage door with one hand, as she hoisted the tiny bundle upwards again, trying to balance it on one hip. The metal door was fully locked in place, helped by rusty patches and a thick chain with a fat lock holding it tight at the bottom. There was no way of entering inside this tiny museum. Perhaps there was a side entrance. As Mia began walking to the next garage door, a bright teal package caught her eye. Diapers. She reached

down, quickly inspecting the plastic wrapping for tears before scooping it up with her free arm. *REPAID*, said the note. Mia frowned in confusion.

She went back to the window, persistent. She tapped on the glass with her knuckle. “Thank you,” she said, her voice distorted by the thin sheet as it reverberated against the metal door. She looked over at the faded sign again and noticed a cord dangling on the other side of the brick wall. There was an old payphone mounted upright with the label *For more info* written in precise block letters stuck to the back of it. Mia reached out to pick up the phone and held it slightly away from her ear. She thought the phone was probably inactive now, faded as the old sign was, or perhaps only good for calling 911. The dial tone emitted a solid note before shifting into the rapid pinging of buttons as it automatically dialed a number.

This is what she heard:

-What goes on four legs, then two, then three?

-What can be seen during the day but lost in the night?

-What comes once a minute, twice a moment, and never in a thousand years?

The robotic voice continued to recite riddles. The baby began to fuss, sensing her mother’s discomfort. Mia rocked the baby, hoping to get her to fall asleep. The voice would say a riddle and then go silent for about thirty seconds before asking another. Mia had never been good at solving puzzles, and the short amount of time to think before being pelted by another question left her uncertain and as dizzy as she had been while staring at the infinite reflections of objects inside the museum. She was about to hang up, when the phone clicked and she heard a quick jingle followed by whirring and grainy ringing.

“Hello?” she asked. The robotic voice had stopped spewing riddles, but now there was only silence that sounded like the phone was being held underwater. “Hello?” she tried again.

She could have sworn she heard breathing, a heavy rasp that dragged in and out. Mia hung up, promptly slamming the receiver back into its metal claw on the wall before speed walking the four blocks home.

That evening, not more than an hour since she had returned home, she received a phone call from an unlisted number. She cautiously picked up, bracing herself for the robotic riddles.

“Mia?”

“Hi Mom.” Mia breathed out a sigh of relief that it wasn’t the museum number, but that relief was tainted by the constant anxiety she felt whenever either of her parents called.

“We haven’t heard from you in a while.” It had been twelve days.

“I know, sorry, I’ve been really busy. It’s been getting calmer, but there are still papers and exams.”

“Midterms should be over for you now, though, right? How do you think you did?”

“Chemistry was tough, but I think I did okay. I had a paper for Renaissance Art History, so that’s probably fine.” A car honked outside. Mia had been downtown one night when her dad called, and she had to say that her roommate was watching a movie in the same room with the volume all the way up. “What about you, Mom? What have you been doing?” Mia found that the best way to avoid questions was to ask her mother about her day, to hear about what life was like for her parents in the empty house, living their lives in some universe in which Mia was now invisible and removed.

“Oh, just the usual. The kids did the pudding paint marble arts and crafts project today. It was such a mess, but they always have fun doing—“

“Mom, can I call you back? There’s another call coming in.”

Click.

“Is this the skylark girl who returned to the Museum at 4:36 this afternoon? She was carrying with her a pile of rags and a new package of diapers.” The voice sounded dusty, like it had been left on a shelf and forgotten.

“Excuse me?” Mia was about to hang up, when the voice spoke again.

“If you are her, I have a favor to ask of you, in exchange for the diapers, if you’d be so willing,” he said. Mia should have known from experience not to take anything from anybody in the city—she had been harassed by a monk last week for taking one of the pamphlets he was passing out; of course he wanted money in exchange and for her to sign up for the mailing list.

“I can’t pay you right now. I can bring them back,” she said, feeling her face burn. She needed to find a job and fast. She had used up her weekly allowance on groceries and a jacket for the baby. She had underestimated the baby’s ability to go through diapers like they were nothing.

“I don’t want money, and I have no use for the diapers. They’re for whatever you have in that secret bundle. I would like to meet you tomorrow at the Strand Bookstore to perhaps work out a deal?”

“What kind of deal?”

“Well I’m looking for a research assistant, and I’d like to talk to you about your qualifications. I’ve seen you pass the Museum quite a few times, so I figured you might have the aptitude for it.”

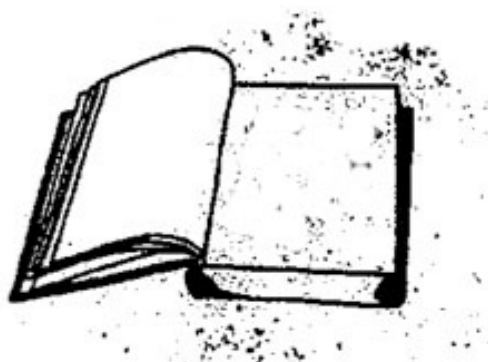
Mia wasn’t sure what that meant exactly, as she still could not piece together the mystery of what underlying commonality tied the objects in the museum together, nor how her ability as a spectator could play into doing research. But she needed a job and she was good at doing research.

“Alright, I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Perfect. Look for a green jacket. May I ask your name?”

“Mia. And yours?”

“You’ll find out tomorrow. Come at your convenience.”



Mia had walked into the Strand, swinging open the glass doors while balancing the baby on her hip, before feeling overcome by a sense of nostalgia for home. Perhaps it was because her parents' overflowing bookshelves at home so closely resembled the crowded, crooked shelves of the bookstore. The odd categories and paraphernalia emblazoned with the bookstore's name sat right at the front. Maybe it reminded her of school, which she already missed, though she had stayed enrolled even as she steadily ballooned up. She missed the library. She missed hiding away in the plush chairs on the third floor, with a stack of books at her feet, underlining quotes with a dim pencil and feeling like an expert as she adroitly navigated through the class seven hundred section all about art history, biography, symbolism, and legend.

At the Strand, she could walk up to the second floor to find all the art history books she could dream of, and in the basement all the textbooks about chemistry, if she had had the time and was not carrying a child in her arms. But where was he? Where was the faded voice from the

phone? He said he would have on a green jacket and be near the information desk, to the right of the cookbooks and before the book exchange counter. He could easily be hidden in the crowd.

There were throngs of people milling about, from students in ripped jeans skipping class to professors scoping out the most obscure editions of the *Odyssey* to tourists in I ♥ NY t-shirts. She realized she did not know what shade of green the jacket was, nor what type of jacket. A man with dark hair and pants that stopped a few inches above his anklebones, revealing drooping purple socks, had on a dark green plaid coat. Another younger man holding a copy of *Batman* had on a pale green windbreaker and beat up gym shoes. The more Mia thought about the voice, the more she wondered if it could have possibly been a woman on the phone, as she scoped out a petite woman wearing a jade green suit jacket and skirt. No, it had to be an older man who had asked for her help. She was positive. She had envisioned him with white or gray hair, thin and frail with thick glasses, like her own, and a wheezing, worrying way about him. And he would not be adept at using computers. His skin would be wrinkled like a book that had been leafed through and dogged eared too many times. At least, that's how he looked in her mind.

She remembered interviewing for colleges while she was a senior in high school. She had arranged to meet one interviewer at a library, one at a taco place, and one at her office. Two had sent pictures of themselves so she at least knew what to expect, and the lady at least sounded as perfectly beige as the walls of her office and conformed to the imagined version that existed in Mia's mind. But this was different, and she felt strange knowing that the stranger knew about her, that she was young and had a baby, had a whole map of conclusions he had drawn about her in his mind, while she knew nothing of him besides that he was wearing a green jacket today.

“What a cutie,” a middle-aged lady approached, her purse thumping against Mia's thigh. Mia's heart sped up, as it always did during these encounters with strangers. “How old is she?”

“Two months,” Mia responded, attempting to move her daughter away from the lady with the stiff blonde hair and rectangular white teeth. She couldn’t believe it had already been two months. How quickly things had changed for the both of them.

“Hi, baby,” the lady cooed. The baby fussed and Mia had to readjust her hold. “What’s her name?”

Mia paused. “Mia,” she said, though in truth, her daughter still was nameless. Mia had held off on providing a name when the birth certificate was presented to her. She had written lists, filled pages of notebooks with possible ideas for names. She had listed relatives on either side of her family, scoured characters from her favorite books, noted down her favorite artists, researched meanings. But a name seemed so permanent, and this didn’t seem like it was her life anymore. If her baby had a name, this would all become real—her life in New York, her status as a college dropout. Plus was she supposed to give her a Chinese middle name? Was she supposed to ground her daughter with a name that would forever root her to the country of Mia’s origin, even though she practically knew nothing about it?

“Hi baby Mia,” the lady said, waving her hands and smiling at the unsmiling little girl. Her dark eyes shone upwards, but she remained unfazed. “Is that short for Amelia?”

“No,” Mia said. “Excuse me, I have to meet with someone.” She glanced down to check the time on her phone, and wandered off into the far back section of the store once again. The city of closed, independent individuals opened up to smiling and cooing conversationalists once you had a baby or a dog. It was a nightmare. Everyone seemed to have something to say about the matter, tips for raising, for nursing, for recommending good schools—things that Mia could barely bring herself to think about, much less devise a plan that would allow for consistency in her daughter’s young life.

“Excuse me,” a low voice said. It was not the voice on the phone, but one of a bookseller.

“Is that your child?”

“Yes,” Mia said defensively, her eyes narrowing. She moved her daughter so he could not see her face. She did not want to deal with another stranger encounter.

“Please come with me. First editions are processed upstairs,” he said, and she followed him to the elevators. They went up to the third floor. It was much emptier than the lower floors.

“Feel free to take a look around while I locate your book request.”

“But I didn’t request a book?”

“I’ll just be a moment,” he said. His mustard yellow nametag was flipped around, so she couldn’t read his name and call back to him as walked behind the counter to rummage around.

Mia ambled slowly around the large room, peeking at the price tags of signed copies of first editions and rare books. “You’re all set,” he said, handing her a brown paper bag.



Inside was a book. It was wearing a green dust jacket, of course. The cover had a large yellow 'X' off to the side, displaced, like the whole book was slanted and off-centered. There was a fallen tree that wrapped around the side, so the stump appeared on the lower left side of the book, while the fallen trunk and branches circled around the back.

There was no visible title of the book, but the author's name sprawled across the bottom in scribbly light yellow font: Magnus R. Echoles. The spine of the book was also curiously blank except for the author's initials, M.R.E., with just the bark of the tree filling up the blank space.

Mia looked at her daughter, nestled in the crook of her arm while she sat on a bench outside. She did not like talking to her in public. She felt like she looked insane, like she was talking to herself, or worse like one of those mothers that always spoke in high-pitched babbling phrases that started with "we." She talked to her frequently, though, when she was at home, but when she was outside she tended to only communicate through glances and whispers. Her daughter looked up at her. "I know this is ridiculous," Mia tried to convey through a look to the baby. "But it's a job, right? And not a terrible one, even though it is unconventional."

She cracked open the book, holding it in her hands around the bundle. A few pages fell out and scattered in the breeze. A boy, probably in high school, was able to jump up and step on them just in time. She thanked him when he handed the papers to her. They were folded in half, a questionnaire that now had shoeprints on the back. She guessed that this was the interview. It had lines for her to fill out name, birthday, marital status, ethnicity, and all the other things that made her cringe. She stuffed it back into the paper bag to maybe fill out at home. She went back to the book.

It was an autographed copy. Part of her was impressed while the other part wanted to roll her eyes at this gift. It was as if the old man were showing off, demonstrating not only that was he an author, but also the fact that he was prolific enough for his signature to add to the book's value. She considered how much she could sell it for online. She quickly flipped through the pages, ignoring most of the writing. She was eager to find a sign that this was the same man who ran the Museum. There was no author bio on the back flap.

She ruffled the edges of the pages to see the shapes of the words, not bothering to really dive in. But she could immediately tell that the book was misprinted. She slowed herself down to skim the first couple of pages. It had done nothing more than situate her in a generic train station. After turning a few more pages, she realized that something was wrong with the book. The third page was upside down. The story resumed, but now it spoke of a bird on the wrong migratory path. The page numbers were missing. Mia could not believe that the copy of the book she had received from M.R.E. was entirely incorrectly assembled. She flipped through the pages, starting backwards, but none of it seemed to make sense in any order as she skimmed for plot. The middle section was in some type of pictographic language. She flipped to the back again.

She had the habit of reading the endings of books before bothering to read them, judging the book by the way it ended to gauge if it was worth her while. The ending seemed like it had been removed as a chunk of pages, and she could not at all be sure of the beginning. Plus without the page numbers, it was not like she could tear all the pages out and reassemble the story to make sense. After this thorough skim-through, she didn't bother to continue her attempt at reading any part of it.

She puzzled over it, tracing her fingers along the cover again. She thought back to the riddles that she had heard on the phone. The man she was working for sure liked to play games. Though she could not seem to crack any of his codes, she had the power of technology on her side. She shifted her daughter in her arms as she reached into her pocket to retrieve her phone.

She quickly searched for the green book with no title and an author by the name of Magnus R. Echoles. This was probably her test to get the job. How well could she research. She knew that Magnus R. Echoles could not outwit the internet with his riddles and secrets. His book popped up, though with a centered cover and pages that were presumably in the correct order. She scrolled through the search results, learning that he had won a few awards for this book, but it had been written over a decade ago. She had been in elementary school and had never even heard of such a book. It had received the National Book Award and was critically acclaimed for its inventiveness of language, transparent translations, and its ability to convey such nostalgia for something that never existed.

She continued to search for more information about the elusive author. She scrolled through a few websites that contained speculations, as Magnus R. Echoles was apparently a pseudonym. Not much else was known about the person behind the name. A brief biography

from his publisher stated, “M.R.E. has been on the run since he first fell into his writing, always running to and from ideas. He is also an amateur weaver and an avid birdwatcher.”



READER, I HAVE PROCURED A FRONT SEAT VIEW FOR YOU. I SUPPOSE YOU HAVE THE ORIGINAL FIRST CHAIR, LIKE A VIOLINIST IN AN ORCHESTRA. DIDN'T YOU SAY THAT YOU PLAYED AN INSTRUMENT? YOU MENTIONED SOME KIND OF LESSONS. IN ANY CASE, IF YOU'RE SITTING THERE, THEN I GUESS THAT MAKES ME THE CONDUCTOR. I CAN TELL YOU WHERE TO GO, WHEN TO MOVE, WHEN TO PLAY, BUT YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR CARRYING IT OUT. I CAN HELP YOU SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE, BUT ONLY IF YOU WANT TO SEE IT.



They were in a park, done for the day, the little mother and daughter—two children, practically—together. Mia watched the families. She missed her parents, but she could not go home, not after this. They did not know anything about this, and she did not know what she could say or do to not give her parents a shock and avoid possibly the same fate as the one she was living out now. But she had done this to herself, inflicted this exile and loneliness because she was too ashamed and anxious about what her parents could possibly do to her at this point. She was not ashamed of her daughter. She was ashamed of herself, of what she had done with her life, after all her parents had done for her. They expected her to work in a respected museum one day, after she had worked hard in school.

She had been double majoring in art history and chemistry and minoring in studio art—she was clearly on her way to doing something with her life. She wanted to restore artwork. Her

plan after graduation was to get into graduate school to get her PhD in art conservation and then proceed to work at the Met.

It was better that they did not know. Someday she would bring it up to them and return home. They would know by graduation, in any case, or the lack thereof. How could she be responsible for another human? She looked around, and there were bright, happy families with children running wildly around the swing set and throwing crisp leaves into the air. She held her bundle tighter to her chest.

“I thought she was a doll,” an older woman said, her voice raspy and low due to years of smoking. “She’s just so well behaved and look at those round little cheeks,” she said. Playing with dolls would be far more believable than Mia taking care of an actual baby. “Is that your sister?”

A few times Mia had conceded and went along with the assumption that she was babysitting or that the baby was her little sister. She didn’t look that young, did she? The bags under her eyes felt permanent, like bruises that never seemed to fade. She went days at a time before finding time to shower. Perhaps she looked no different than when she was a college student, but she felt much older and much more tired all the time. She preferred going along with the lie rather than getting the disdainful looks from perky and young, but not *that* young, mothers, though.

“Yes, we’re just out getting some air,” Mia said in reply.

“I bet your mother’s proud of you, taking such good care of your baby sister. Now isn’t she a good big sister?” the woman rasped at both of them.

“We should probably be getting home for dinner,” Mia said, her face darkly flooded with the hot guilt that she could never escape from whenever she thought too much about her dear old

mom and dad. Dinner for her would be the same sad meal of peanut butter and jelly or eggs, but she was able to abruptly get up from her spot in the park, and leave the older woman behind with her questions and assumptions that made Mia's head and heart hurt.

“There is no place like home,” she read to the baby from an old battered copy of the *Wizard of Oz*. “But we can't go home anytime soon. Not yet,” she added, stroking her daughter's pink cheeks and thinking of how home was more of a time and a state of mind than a place at this point in her life. Her home life had preserved itself so nicely when she had gone off to school, suspended and petrified to reflect her eighteen year-old self, which she morphed into whenever she returned.

The next visit to the Museum of Lost Things occurred after Mia had secured the book with the green jacket and scoured the internet on her laptop for any more information on M.R.E. Her search yielded no more information than that sparse first time.

This time, the Museum was lit up from the light bulb suspended from the ceiling. Mia rapped quickly on the thick window, a staccato tapping that made the lock jolt but otherwise did nothing else. The interior of the museum was unchanged, but she realized that the book that she held in her hands was the same green book that sat on a shelf in the bottom left corner. Or perhaps it was at the top right corner? It was difficult to tell which one was the original with all the mirrors.

Peering inside at the Museum was like she was playing an unnerving game of *I Spy*. “Magnus R. Echoles?” Mia spoke, her voice a wavering muted question through the door, but it echoed through the alleyway. The baby squirmed to turn her head. She stared at the frenetic

room, her eyes like orbs taking in all the colors and textures and words. “I spy with my little eye something green,” Mia said in a cheerful whisper, trying to convince her daughter that the chaotic piles of faded papers and misplaced windows and other assorted garbage were something to celebrate and take lightly. Instead, they were the source of her unease that continued to be overshadowed by curiosity. “Hello?” she tapped on the window again, her voice echoing in her ears.

The unidentified dripping that occurs throughout New York mostly and hopefully originates from air conditioner units. But it was the middle of fall. Whatever the substance was plopped onto Mia’s shoulder and made her look up, right into the large and vacant eye of a CCTV camera that was mounted high up on the brick wall that bordered the right side of the door of the museum. It was angled to capture the profile of museum visitors when they craned their necks to see inside.

Mia turned away uncomfortably from the video camera as she dialed the phone number on the sign once again. It rang and only recited one riddle about a container without hinges but golden treasure inside before the dialing sounds and the jingle and then a creaky “Hello, Mia.”

“Hi. Magnus R. Echoles? Echoles?” She echoed the pronunciation of his last name, unsure whether the *ch* sound was hard or soft.

“Just ‘E’ is fine. Mister. I see you’ve completed the first task. Very good.” He was looking at the back of her head, her long dark hair like a cape. He saw the curious eyes of the baby peering out directly at him. Even through the camera, he could tell she was the spitting image of her mother in miniature. At just two months old, she had a thick halo of black hair and a button for a nose. She had the same curious stare, the wondering eyes rimmed by spidery eyelashes.

“I don’t think the Strand had the right edition of your book, or maybe it’s just that my copy is messed up,” Mia said as she clenched the phone between her shoulder and her ear so she could flip through the pages with one hand to double check to see if the pages had somehow magically rearranged themselves to make sense.

“No, that is the correct copy. It was unintended, but this edition is correct. You’ll notice that I circled some words for you to look over. Let me know what you think, and when you think you’re ready for the next task, you know where to find me,” he said, his voice sounding more and more distant.

Mia wondered where Mr. E was actually located. She assumed he lived near the Museum, maybe even above it in the dingy little apartment building even though it looked abandoned. He had to live nearby because he was somehow spying on her, noting down the details of her life—her dark hair, her daughter. That camera was startling.

“Did you fill out the paperwork? I’d like to offer you the job as my research assistant.”

Mia ignored her first instinct to say no. She had met her fair share of questionable people in the city in her short time there and had no desire to work for one. But she could use the money and he had said that she could make her own hours. She was suspicious, however, as he did not know anything of her job background. He had not yet read through her mostly blank questionnaire that she had tried to fill out last night.

“But don’t you want to see the paperwork first?”

“You found out my name.” So that was the interview, the test. She had passed. Her shoddy job background didn’t matter. She wondered if this was a setup of sorts. M.R.E. was a penname, after all, so she was talking to someone who practically didn’t exist. He could be anyone.

“You would want me to research objects for your Museum of Lost Things?” she asked.

“You mean the Museum of L’origine?” he said, and she realized that she had incorrectly assumed what the sign said. She had read it wrong, and she blushed because she was clearly out of practice, all those conservation classes for nothing. The new name seemed more hopeful, though. “I do need to repaint that sign. I opened the Museum years ago, as a systematic display to categorize my collections, but I haven’t been able to change the exhibition for the last several years or so. I am looking for new things to put into the Museum, so that’s where you come in. I must warn you that this will not be a normal job—“

“I figured,” she said.

“—Right, yes, well you will conduct research according to my directions and run errands to collect various items. The research will be based around the novel that I’ve started. As you can probably tell from the one in your hands, I haven’t written in quite some time.” The publication date of the book with the green jacket was over a decade old.

“That sounds fine,” Mia said, suspicious since nothing sounded too alarmingly out of the ordinary.

“You can leave the paperwork in the mail slot behind the wall before you leave. You’re free to make your own hours as long as you meet deadlines. Stop by anytime to check in.”

The deal sounded too good to be true. She had been offered a job when she most desperately needed one, when she had been putting off the fact that she needed to go and job hunt after her previous employment at the grocery store had not worked out, and her daughter had a pack of diapers that would last for the week.

“What’s the first topic of research?” Mia asked.

“That’s for you to find out. As I said earlier, it’s all in the book. That’s where you should start, and your ability to draw lines of intersection will be the boundary of your job security.”

There was a catch after all.

Questionnaire

Name: Mia X. Reid

Address: 14th Street

Date of Birth: April 16

Ethnicity: N/A



I HAVE BEEN NOTICING THE WAY YOU’VE BEEN SHIFTING WHILE READING THIS. RELAX YOUR GRIP ON THE BOOK. IT WON’T FLY AWAY FROM YOU IF YOU CRADLE IT INSTEAD OR EVEN IF YOU SET IT DOWN FOR A MOMENT TO ADJUST YOUR READING ARRANGEMENT. PERHAPS YOU SHOULD PUSH UP YOUR GLASSES AND MOVE TO A ROOM WITH A SUFFICIENT LIGHT SOURCE. MOVE CLOSER TO THE FIRE TO SEE BETTER. I DO NOT WANT YOU TO STRAIN YOUR EYES. DO YOU SEE THE LIGHT SPILLING OUT BETWEEN THE CRACKS? THIS INTRICATE PUZZLE? THIS WALTZ OF THE LITTLE BLACK LETTERS THAT YOU ARE HUMMING ALONG TO?



After a sleepless night, Mia returned to the alleyway.

She had had a hard time of bathing the baby in the sink when her building had decided it was time for maintenance and turned the water off. After drying the suds off as best as she could, she tucked her daughter into bed, on top of her pillow. Her little arms and legs wiggled around. Mia slept next to her, with a hand gently draped over her daughter’s leg as she tried to doze. But

it was difficult to sleep with another squirming human by her face. She supposed that she could have pushed a chair against her bed to make a tiny cradle, but she liked the security of having her hand over her daughter through the night. She could whisper secrets to her, tell her stories. “You look nothing like him. You’re all mine.”

She watched her as she slept, like her own mother did to her. She wondered what her mother, with her striking spiraling red hair, thought of Mia when she slept. She could not trace the similarities of their features, which Mia did as she studied her daughter’s tiny nose all the way down to her squishy little toes. She had no pictures of herself from when she was that young, but she felt like she was looking at a tiny part of herself that had been bottled up and released to her nearly adult self, a tiny forgotten corner of memory.

She couldn’t sleep, even though she was exhausted. The weight of her daughter’s foot on her shoulder felt like it weighed a ton. She got up and puzzled over the green book. She flipped through the pages again, folding the corners down of the pages that had been inserted upside down. In very light pencil that looked like it had been erased, she could see traces of words that had been circled and underlined. She could not make out the translucent cursive that curled into the margins like smoke, however, especially in the dim light. This writing only occurred on the upside down pages. She slowly and quietly extricated herself from the bed without waking up the baby and walked the three steps it took to get to the bathroom. The yellow light spilled onto the pages, causing her to squint as she recorded the words down in a notebook. They were: *On the Origin of Species, Field Museum, the letter ‘T’, episode of the madeleine, Babar*. She was not quite sure what to do with that.

Back in the alleyway, with her hair tied up like it was a net that was trying to hold all of her thoughts and memories inside her head, she picked up the phone. She had her notebook resting inside her jacket pocket, her daughter in her other arm. Today the phone played music. She was pleased by the change from the riddles, even though the music sounded like it was being cranked on a music box made from a tin can. The song was familiar—something older, from the 40s or 50s, but Mia couldn't exactly place it. She was sure it would be stuck in her head later. It had a jazzy tune and contained the word *beyond*. She jotted it down in the corner of her notebook.

"I've decided we need a code word so I know it's you," Mr. E said in place of a greeting.

"I'm the only person who ever comes down this way, though, right?"

"Yes, but I didn't recognize you with your hair like that," he said.

"Oh. Well then what do you propose?" She didn't know what to make of his comment. She had looked the same since she was about fifteen, the same height, haircut, and glasses.

"What's the first thing that comes to mind?"

"Beyond," Mia said. She sighed. She felt like she was playing games with a baby, or worse because she would not raise her daughter to be so infuriating. "But how do you know I'm me right now?"

"How do you know you're you? And even if you did, how do you know who you are right now?"

She shook her head as if to clear away the jumbled thoughts. He had a way of practically speaking in riddles even when he wasn't actually speaking in riddles that seemed to get to her. There was no way for him to know this, but in fact, there was a chance moment when she was a baby where she almost was not herself.

Her parents had her referral picture stuck to the refrigerator at home in Illinois. It honestly could have been any Chinese baby. She did not think it looked like her. The baby in the picture had practically no hair, milky eyes, and thin little fingers. Her skin was a mottled, splotchy purple. She was bundled up in layers of sweaters so she could not move. Her arms stuck out at her sides. Her baby pictures that her parents had snapped on their Polaroid camera showed a little girl with a full head of hair that stuck out in every direction, bright and alert eyes, and pudgy hands that always held fistfuls of crayons and markers.

Based off of the original referral picture, though, her parents were still somehow able to sense that something was wrong when they were given a long and skinny baby who sucked on her bottom lip. It was the wrong child. The caregivers quickly corrected the mistake. Mia was placed into the arms of Arden and William Reid, while one of the other girls she was adopted with, Hope, was sent off with her parents to California.

She could have had many different lives time and time again. It was all up to chance that she had been picked up from that railroad station and placed in the Suzhou Social Welfare Institute. She could have gone home with any family, ended up in a different state or even a different country. She could have had ended up in any of her China cousin's places—in Hope's place, with three siblings, her houseful of animals, as the star of the soccer team, studying to become a physical therapist at UCLA. But she had found her way to Illinois and from there to the University of Delaware and then New York, where she had been tumbling around, blown around by chance as if she were inside of a tornado these last few months.

By chance, she had gotten pregnant. Had she not, she would have been hunched over her desk, researching internships for the spring semester.

“Do you have anything for me today?” Mr. E asked.

“You had underlined some words on the misprinted pages, about evolution and origins and the Field Museum? I could do some online research of those things, or I could go to the library and search their databases,” Mia said, resisting the urge to add, *along with a whole bunch of other random things that were also in that book*. She had not yet figured out the missing link between the words written and erased from the pages of his misprinted book, what was connecting them, but she felt paranoid that he had mentioned a museum too close to home—real home. He couldn’t possibly know about where she had come from, though. She had only listed her New York address on his forms. Maybe he meant for her to contact someone at the Field Museum about Darwin?

“Online? No. I’m going to give you a hint because this is your first assignment, but don’t expect for any further help after this. I’d like you to head uptown—take the B—to 81st Street. Sitting in front of a computer will be of no use to me at this point. I need you to record everything along the way. Bring me back any receipts and tickets for your reimbursement. Whatever else you collect, return back to me sometime between tonight and tomorrow.”

Though the request seemed strange, Mia did not pause to question it. She had figured she would end up running errands, doing the occasional odd job for the eccentric author. “You want me to bring stuff back?” she asked.

“It’s currently very difficult for me to get around, especially in the city. I’d appreciate your retelling of the day and your experiences.”

“Where exactly are you?” she asked. She heard a short breathy laugh through the phone.

“Nowhere. Don’t worry about it,” he said. “I have some supplies that might help you record your journey. They’re next to the brick wall.”

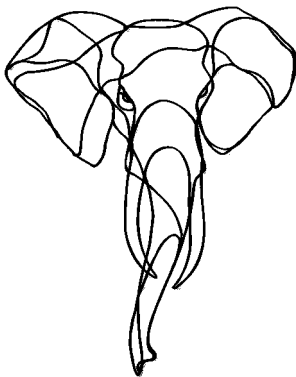
Items next to the brick wall:

- a camcorder on a lanyard
- a blank notebook of white pages between black covers
- large envelopes
- folders
- crayons

“Thank you?” Mia said as she collected everything into her backpack, which was already full of diapers, washcloths, and wipes. She felt happy to be wearing it again, for it to have a purpose instead of sitting sadly in the back of her closet full of old sketchbooks and chemistry notes smeared with unidentifiable stains and spiky paintbrushes.

“I set up the video camera so you can wear it around your neck, if you like, to better record your steps through the city.”

“Oh, that’s alright, I think I’ll be using that sparingly,” she said, trying not to turn her head upwards to face the CCTV camera. She did not need him monitoring her every step. She stuffed the camera into the very bottom of her bag before setting off to 81st Street. Wouldn’t it have been easier just to tell her where to go and what to look for instead of sending her cryptic messages to do vague tasks?



She was a park's distance away from where she wanted to be—the Metropolitan Museum of Art. One day she'd go, as a visitor. She hadn't been there since she was about seven years old, when her extended adoptive family had had a reunion in New York and decided to give her and her China cousins the full cultural experience. Mia had ended up dragging her dad by the hand through the Impressionist rooms. Her cousins had grown tired of their game of count the butts, and had sat down on the floor to rest their tired feet. Mia could have spent a lifetime there, though, and swore that one day she would work there.

Instead she was a world away. He had sent her to see the elephants in the middle of Manhattan.

She walked beneath the belly of the big blue whale, among the waterless blue waves that washed over her daughter's sleeping head, turning the tips of her hair and her round little nose an alien blue. She looked around at the bodies spread out in the undulating waters, gazing up at the impossible creature.

She walked through the galaxies, around the moon, skimmed over the constellations, and spun out of orbit. The baby slept through black holes and the Big Bang. Gems and meteorites were frozen in space.

She walked down the hallway to arrive in Asia. She stared at the animals that stood inside their glass rooms and stared back at her with their vacant, glassy eyes. Their eyes looked just like the crystalized orbs that she had seen over by the planets. The baby roused and looked around with her own wide eyes at the animals with the empty stares and the stiff, forced poses. Why weren't they moving? "Water buffalo, rhinoceros, leopard," Mia said, as her daughter extended a hand to touch the glass.

The leopard's legs were posed in mid-air as if he were still pursuing something, on the hunt. Everything had vanished so long ago that he was now just chasing dust. He didn't know that, in his glass cage. He would run forever, stuck in a state of permanent movement, always straight ahead.

The background environments to each display were as flat as a sheet of paper. They were paintings. Even with the fake trees that were added in, or the grasses that blurred the clean edge where the glass met the wall, they looked unnaturally still and flattened. How could these creatures possibly be restored to their former glory? They were models frozen in time; the past was forced to exist.

Mia thought about her wallpaper at home. It had friendly cartoon wild animals. It had been in her room since she was a baby, and she had never bothered to replace it as she grew older. She felt safe between the smiling orange lions, the silly yellow giraffes, and the blue elephants with their shy smiles beneath their trunks. The images had faded with time, but the

animals were still there. She wondered if her daughter was seeing some kind of version of that. The same but more. She paced around the room, until the animals blurred together.

The eyes of these creatures were haunting—more predatory than watchful—just like the eye of the camera that peered over at her at The Museum of L’origine. They leered at her from every side of the room.

She took a seat so she could take out her notebook. She thought of Babar on the list. “Here are the elephants,” she said, looking up and over her shoulder. They were slightly smaller than the African elephants in the room next door, but still powerful and impressive beneath their wrinkles. They looked strangely kind, unlike the menacing eyes of the other creatures tucked away behind glass and preserved in a permanent stasis, in their public graves. They served as a lesson to avoid getting trapped in time for all of New York to see. The baby stared at her hands, her chubby little fingers wrinkled like the elephants’ legs.

Mia sketched quickly for Mr. E. She tried to capture the vacant but oddly cheerful stares of the frozen beasts, out of time. They did not have flattened postcard painted backgrounds of falsely expansive blue skies and golden brown plains that ended where the wall began. They stood in the middle of everything, in the middle of the present day. They were surrounded by visitors, texting on cellphones and listening to audio guides. Everything around them moved and teemed with life as they stood fixed at the center of it all, observing everything and remembering nothing.

Mia would not want to be frozen as her twenty-year-old self at the present moment in time, put on display, stuck forever. She thought of her room at home. It had not changed since she had graduated high school, and even before that, she had been unwilling to redecorate. She clung to the order that she had established when she had entered first grade. One by one things

were replaced, but quickly swapped for the upgrade of the same thing. According to her room, practically nothing about Mia had changed throughout the years. Her plastic blue and white desk was replaced by a solid wooden desk; her sheets had gone from smiling pandas to delicate floral patterns; and her stuffed animals had slowly diminished over the years. The ephemera on her dresser had collected dust, a layer of sooty snow on top of glass figurines of violins, miniature wind-up carousels, and ceramic painted nameplates she had made in school. Other than that, the room was essentially unchanged. It was a permanent shrine to her eighteen-year-old self, her eighteen-year-old mentality and her reluctance to change in favor of newness.

She loved the familiarity of her room whenever she returned home, hiding under the same pale blue comforter that she had bundled beneath as a six year-old, the gauzy curtains that made the sun stream in as a muted pink every morning, and the clean scent of her pillows from the detergent her mother had always used. But she had never made herself quite at home during these short visits back for winter break, spring break, summer vacation. She lived out of a suitcase in her own room, and she left boxes and piles of papers behind, moving from here to there each season. Her room was once a place where she had lived and now it was merely a storage unit, collecting more items for the archives.

She realized that she did this now, in the room that she was renting. Well, not quite renting as much as inhabiting. Everything was in its place, a new slate, but mostly untouched. At home, she had little secrets and memories tied up with strings and notes tucked away on her bookshelf, report cards slipped behind signed yearbook covers, baby teeth hidden in the back of her underwear drawer. The room she lived in now carried none of these little relics that made her room home. And if her room at home was a museum and her current place of residence was just an empty shell, where did she belong?

WOULD YOU FEEL DISPLACED IF I PAUSED FOR A MOMENT TO INTERRUPT THE FLOW OF THE STORY TO TELL YOU MORE ABOUT YOURSELF? WILL YOU BE READY WHEN I REMOVE MYSELF FROM THE TEXT? I SUPPOSE IT WILL BE HARD FOR YOU TO TELL EITHER WAY.

Mia continued to record this experience, omitting most of her thoughts of home. She listed the other animals in the room beneath her sketches, along with the facts about Asian elephants from a plaque that rested permanently at their feet:

Asian elephants used to live in areas stretching from Iraq to southern China, where some still live wild. The habitats these forest mammals once occupied have been cut down to make way for farms and villages. They are now mostly confined to hilly regions where human contact is minimal (AMNH website).

She could relate to transience. Perhaps this is why they were given their place at the center of the room, no backdrop, because they were wanderers, too.

She stared directly into the closest one's silent eye. It seemed lonely. Mia supposed the elephants had each other, like how she had her daughter, since her herd at home was far away. She moved to the city to get away from the same human contact. She did not want her group of friends to know about her daughter. She did not want anyone at school to know. She had worn out her second home. She wanted something different. But even though she had been relatively successful at maintaining anonymity in the city, she couldn't help feeling like wherever she settled, she would make an imprint, nest, and soon be all too comfortable in another home, another trap. She wanted to be alone, but she also wanted not to feel alone.

She rarely made eye contact anymore, she paused before going into stores, and she only spoke the minimum to get through interactions (especially during those annoyingly curious instances that involved assumptions and incorrect judgments). She had evaded human contact from her mother, her father, her friends, her teachers, her neighbors, until she was surrounded by swarms of strangers and dead elephants as company. She was around millions of people everyday but felt so lonely sometimes. Her daughter was good company, always amazing her with the smallest accomplishments like wiggling her tiny toes and managing such big sneezes from such a tiny human. But she still missed those constant conversations with roommates and professors, the lightness between her and her parents. She had left all that was familiar to find silence, but now there was just this constant buzzing in the background from the sea of voices that did not speak to her.

Mia moved her hand across the page to scribble in the eyes of the elephants. She wondered what images were imprinted on their eyes as they saw their last visions a century ago. Those were the memories that were permanent. She wondered about her daughter's memory, as her eyes followed up the trunk and tusks of the mammoths. She did not think her baby would recall this time in her life, and she released the breath that she had been holding.

Mia felt the delicate beating of her daughter's heart, tender and scaled down to the microscopic level compared to the booming footfalls of those powerful mammoths that could only stand in the present and reflect the lively crowds in their empty eyes.

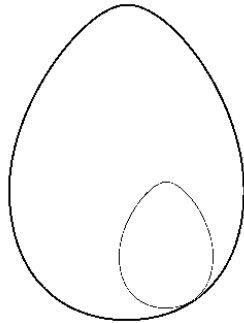
She followed the exit signs to leave, passing through the wing of early civilizations. They traveled through the Paleolithic era and stayed in the Mesolithic era. Perhaps this is what Mr. E had wanted Mia to see.

The chicken was out of place. Or maybe the backdrop was out of place. Either way, there was no way that a chicken should have been among the dinosaurs. Yet, a plucky, feathered stuffed creature stood in the Hall of Sauriscian Dinosaurs, in front of the window displaying the flattened gray sky outside and surrounded by a threatening cage of bones. One orange foot was planted on the ground, and one was slightly raised, like it was walking. Why did the chicken cross the road? Why did the chicken cross the museum? Why did the chicken time travel to the Mesolithic era with a roomful of predators, bony and eyeless but still threatening? Mia could not say, but seeing the chicken frozen in its shuffle either towards or away from the dinosaurs made her feel a sense of panic. Lost. Out of place. Threatened. Confused. She wanted to stuff the feathered animal into her daughter's baby carrier and bolt all three of them out of there, to propel things into comforting motion again. She knew that the chicken was perpetually stuck in its existential crisis, however, and so she walked away from it, taking one last sidelong glance. She could not figure out if the curator had placed it there as a joke or if some mischievous museum attendee thought it would be funny to alienate the poor bird. She left the era of the dinosaurs behind to step into the present, back to her life.

Outside, she could finally breathe again. The rain soaked air seeped into her skin and made it tingle with the chill. She was aware of her own heartbeat, her daughter's quiet breathing, the whizzing of taxis, the flapping pigeons, the fresh air just over the wall in Central Park. She felt alive again, as the water dampened her skin. Her daughter smiled up a gummy grin at the sky.

A feather. Mia felt her cheeks heat up with embarrassment when she removed the white chicken feather from her bag that evening. Mr. E would either think that this was hilarious or he

would be furious that she had stolen from a historic museum. It definitely earned a place in his museum, she thought. It wasn't against the rules, and it was really just a transfer of part of an exhibition from one museum to another. The feather twirled in her fingers.



Mia deposited the folder labeled October 27, 3 p.m., AMNH to the Museum of L'origine within twenty-four hours of her visit. Her daughter was once again spooned into the red baby carrier that was strapped against her mother's chest. Mia slipped the taped up folder into the deposit slot in the brick wall and picked up the payphone.

"Hello," a voice came quickly on the second ring.

"Mr. E, I just dropped off the observations from the Museum of Natural History."

"Excellent. Just a moment."

Mia listened to the silence for a few minutes before it was replaced by those irritating riddles:

-Why is a raven like a writing desk?

-How do you begin at the beginning?

Mia peered into the museum, her eyes skimming past the dusty objects. She wondered if she would end up being the one to change out the items inside. It did not seem like anyone had

been inside the Museum in years, though. It could probably only hold about two people inside at a time—three tops. It was the size of a broom closet or an elevator. Mr. E was probably the only person who had ever been on the inside. Everyone else who wanted to visit could only look in through the windows. There was so little that Mia knew about Mr. E, besides the fact that he was once a well-known author, he liked to play games, he had an interest in birds, and he was immobile. Plus the letters of his name did not belong to him. She assumed that he was older, but beyond that, she did not have much else to go off of. So she tried to read more into the objects in his museum to see if they would give away any clues. They still seemed unrelated to her.

“Quite nice sketches,” Mr. E’s voice said through the phone after a click and rustle. Mia had the urge to take a look inside the mail slot in the brick wall, but she felt like nothing would come out of it except for darkness. “Green elephants,” he chuckled. She had drawn them in crayon, unable to find the dull pencil in the recesses of the backpack full of baby gear. She had added a crown on one of the elephants, to show that she had found his *Babar* reference.

“You’re an artist.” It was not a question.

“No.” She just returned art to its original state. She did not create her own.

“They’re very good, in any case, though the writing is a bit lacking. You made some nice lists, but maybe flesh them out a bit more next time. Certain lines are a little sparse, so it’s hard for me to perceive a good sense of character. I need you to go deeper. Pretend these assignments are like a journal, a diary of your day-to-day events on these trips.” Mia thought this seemed a invasive and besides the point of his research.

“Tell me again, what is it exactly that you’re researching?” she asked.

“A plethora—a compendium,” he said.

“Of what?” she asked.

“Items. As I explained to you a couple of days ago, I would like to update the Museum according to the new book that I’m working on. It’s time to get some new ideas flowing.”

“Right.” Mia could still not bring herself to outright ask what the items in the Museum had in common with each other. How was he going to display something as vague and intangible as an ‘idea’ anyway? Mia still didn’t understand how mammoths and cities, taxidermy and dinosaur bones, chickens and writing were to be united under the same theme.

“I’ll spend a few days perusing the material you’ve just delivered, but I see that you already found the clue to get to my next assignment.” Mia didn’t know what he was talking about. She had not found a clue. She didn’t know how those objects were related, much less how they would relate to the next place. “It shouldn’t be too hard for you to figure out. I’m going easy on you, since you just finished up the first official assignment.”

Mia thought back to the American Museum of Natural History. “You told me where to go, though. You gave me the train stop.”

“Yes, but you figured out what I wanted you to see while you were there. How did you go about it?”

“I just sort of followed along with what you had written down inside the book you gave to me. *Babar* was the only clear thing on that list, so I looked for the elephants. The Field Museum and the *Origin of Species* made me think of evolution and then Sue, so I went to the dinosaur wing.”

“Sue?”

“Sue, the dinosaur. At the Field Museum.” Why wasn’t he getting it? Hadn’t he been the one to offer her the puzzle pieces?

“Interesting. Well, then you saw what I wanted you to see, and those things will help you decide where to go next.”

Mia thought about the directions that the elephants were facing: one north, one east, and one in-between. They were staggered so that they could not be pointing in a clear direction. She wished she could take her notes back to have another look at the information she had collected. Mr. E would probably never return them to her.

“Can you just tell me where to go next?” Mia asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet to keep herself and the baby warm. Dead leaves crunched to shards.

“No, that was in our contract, remember? You will be employed with the Museum of L’origine as long as you continue to piece things together.”

“Any clues then?” She heard him sigh on the other end of the line. She remembered that he had said he would not give her any clues after that first one, when he had told her to take the subway uptown. But she was lost.

“Follow the feather. Dig deep into your memory, but don’t overthink it. It’s gone unsolved.”

Mia frowned at the cryptic clue, but she could not resist a challenge. She had been told it would take her five years to graduate instead of the usual four if she wanted to get both art history and chemistry degrees and also finish her minor in studio art. She had jumbled her classes together one night, playing Tetris with time slots. She had succeeded, though. She could finish on time, with no room for error. There had evidently been an error, but she was still triumphant that it could have been done. This task of solving the clue and completing the assignment was just another challenge for her work out.

Mia went home. She didn't know what to do with herself, with these long unstructured days that varied depending on whether or not she was completing an assignment for Mr. E or not, and further depended on the nature of the assignment itself. When she was at school, she had worked three days a week in the library, with consistent hours. Once she had moved to New York, shortly before the baby was born, she filled her days with series of odd jobs, from dog walking to modeling in circus costumes for sketch night at the Society of Illustrators. She had felt bad about not getting out to see the city more when she had first made the move, but now she felt worse because she spent the majority of the day cooped up inside her practically windowless little room. She could not bring herself to deal with all the questions from outside.

One look inside her refrigerator told her that she would have to go back outside, though, to deal with the crowds who shoved and stared at her baby. "We are out of everything. Time to go grocery shopping," she said, strapping her daughter back inside the sling. She did not seem to mind too much. Mia waddled down the stairs with a list in hand.

Her grocery list was surprisingly long for someone who lived practically alone. Alone, if only counting the number of people who could chew and eat solid foods, but the baby had added to the list with gentle shampoos and diapers and little toys that Mia felt necessary to her daughter's development.

She browsed the fruits and vegetables, the handle of her shopping basket nestled into the crook of her elbow. She remembered the first time she had had to shop for groceries without her parents. She had gone with her roommate during her freshman year of college. The two of them had ended up with a trunk full of endless jars of peanut butter (it was on sale) and six boxes of cereal. Mia made shopping lists from that point on. She had become an expert at navigating the tiny grocery store on the corner a few blocks away from her apartment where everyone had to

keep their basket tight against themselves and their elbows in in order for any movement within the shop to actually happen. The narrow shelves and upwards displays were tricky to navigate without knocking everything over or forgetting anything. Mia was familiar with the store layout, so she was able to get all the vegetables on her list, a bag of apples, soup, noodles and toss them easily into her basket. The milk weighed it down. Then the carton of eggs.

The eggs. The chicken was crossing the road. It had been standing next to a model of a dinosaur egg. Which came first: the chicken or the egg? Mia could not tell if she was delirious from her day out, on her feet all day, absorbing facts and doodling large mammals and carrying around her little bundle of rags, but the chicken was so blatantly obvious. Perhaps this was just a grocery run for Mr. E. She placed another carton of smooth white eggs into her basket and checked out.

She could not wait to see if she had cracked his riddle, so after a hastily prepared dinner of spaghetti, she prepared once again to pay a visit to the alleyway. Her daughter, however, had other ideas.

“Come on, sleepy, just one more time,” Mia said as she coaxed the bundled up baby into the red carrier once again. The baby kicked her legs and let out a tiny wail of frustration. “Last trip today, I promise.” Mia was too worn out to carry her daughter in her arms to the Museum, while also making sure none of the eggs broke, so she decided that they were done for the day. “Fine.” Her voice was harsh. “Are you just watching out for me?” she asked more gently to her daughter, who was lying flat on the kitchen table. She opened and closed her tiny fists.

Mia felt safe in Manhattan, overall, though her mother would be worrying her head off if she knew her only child was living in the biggest city in the U.S., alone, and taking shortcuts

through alleyways where she could be stabbed and murdered. Her mother watched too many crime shows anyway. Her mother always threatened Mia with, “You’ll feel differently once you’re a mother,” but Mia had not thought that day would come this soon, and she could not tell if she felt differently. She was careful, but she had always been careful—except that one time. She was taking care of herself. She was taking care of her daughter as best as she could without the support from anyone else. She was fine.

She had spent the last of her allowance on boxes of pasta, colorful cereal, and a single tomato. She had not had a full night of sleep since December of last year, and she had a two-month-old baby that she was hiding from the world. She was not fine.

Mia sunk down, leaning against the kitchen counter and tried not to let it get to her. She focused on the yellow wallpaper in the kitchen. It had started peeling along the seams, the glue coming undone so the edges curled out. She stared at it until it blurred and pooled in her vision. Her eyes burned from the salt. She imagined that she was looking directly into the sun. She stared until her vision turned white. A weak thump of her daughter’s foot smacking the table made her stand up and crack open a window so the night air could come in and clear out her thoughts. She turned the faucet as cold as it could go and ran her hands, wrists, and arms under the water. Goosebumps prickled her skin, but she still felt as if she were burning. She was thinking too much, going too far into that space in her mind where the spinning reels jumped so that everything came unhinged and began to unravel.

“We just have to keep busy, and things will be okay. Everything works out in the end,” Mia said, as she pulled her daughter’s body off of the table and into her shaky arms. That’s what her dad had said to her whenever things went wrong: after she failed a math test in fourth grade, after she was rejected from the prestigious arts high school, after she had a meltdown her first

week of college after realizing what she had signed herself up for and so far away from home, too.

She rubbed at her eyes with the heels of her hands, not wanting her daughter to see her fall apart, even though she was sure that she would not remember any of this time in her young life. She was positive that this would be erased from her memory. Mia remembered nothing from when she was a baby. Her China cousin Kaitlin was the oldest in the group of babies Mia was adopted with. Kaitlin was already a toddler by the time the girls were sent home. Mia had a photo of the group of them on her bedroom wall at home, seated on a bench wearing pastel colors on the day their parents picked them up. Mia was the youngest. She was on one end, reaching for something in front of her, beyond, that the camera had not seen. Kaitlin sat up straight without any help at the other end, three years old, towering above the fuzzy heads of the babies.

The cousins had not met up since Mia was a sophomore in high school. They used to have annual reunions at the end of each summer, but once Kaitlin had started college, the reunions fell apart. People started having lives and finding jobs, starting careers, and the parents were getting older and less willing to trek across the country to meet up for a couple of days. The reunions were like any other family reunion, Mia assumed, as she did not have a large extended family through her parents. Even though the cousins only saw each other for these handfuls of days, they always fell back into step. They were bound together through the same unlikely circumstances and the results of chance. That's what Mia figured held them together. Gradually the group had diminished, perhaps because they no longer were seeking support or had new destinations to move towards, something that Mia had not quite figured out for herself yet. Maybe they were all hiding from each other because they all were just very lost.

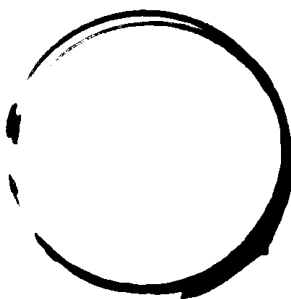
That last reunion (that they did not know would be their last), the cousins sat in the hallway of the hotel that their families were staying at, and talked about their memories. Kaitlin confessed that she felt terrible that she could not remember a single thing from her life in China. She had already had enough of a vocabulary to carry on short conversations, but all that was lost when she slipped into her life set up in Connecticut. If Kaitlin didn't have a single memory, how was Mia supposed to?

She retreated to her little room, her daughter solid in her arms. She traced her thumb over the baby's soft forehead and began to whisper a story.



DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE BITS YOU CAN'T UNDERSTAND. SIT BACK AND ALLOW THE WORDS TO CASCADE LIKE MUSIC.





Of the 1.6 million people living in Manhattan, it is surprising how often people find ways to keep bumping into each other. On her way to the Museum the next morning, one of Mia's greatest fears came true. She ran into someone she knew, someone who would know this corner of her life. Any person from the past would have the accidental power of acknowledging Mia's life to be true in its current state, and then it would become real. "Mia?" a lanky boy with electric blue hair approached her on the crowded sidewalk. Mia froze. She was like a boulder, stuck in place amid a river whose current split around her. It was hard to remain in place, but it was even harder to make her feet move. People spilled around them, some muttering curses or bumping shoulders as they brushed passed. It was too late to keep moving.

"Hi, Dan."

"I haven't seen you around campus. What are you doing here? Are you babysitting?" he asked, eyes moving to her child.

"I'm here for the semester," she lied, avoiding the baby question.

“Sweet, I’m in for the weekend, visiting my great aunt. I’m running errands for her, but you want to grab coffee or something, if you have time for a break?” The plastic bag holding the carton of eggs felt heavy as it twisted around her fingers. She was torn between slipping into her old life as a stressed-out but otherwise carefree student and running away from him in an attempt to erase this encounter. The desire to hear about school and pretend that she was still just a normal college kid was too tempting. Besides, she could use a break and time to warm up. She wouldn’t be long. She could just stop in with Dan and then get back to her job.

The chamomile tea steamed up Mia’s cheeks. It tasted even better because Dan had swooped in to pay the outrageous five dollars for it. “You’re not drinking coffee?” he asked, stunned. She shrugged. She had stopped drinking coffee once she had withdrawn from school, even though she was getting much less sleep now. She had been a bit of an excessive caffeine addict while juggling chemistry and art history and drawing classes. But she had read that caffeine affected the baby, so she had stopped. “So what are you up to in the city this semester? You interning?” he asked, leaned back in his chair like he didn’t have a care in the world.

“Yeah, I’m working for a small museum,” Mia said, readjusting her daughter on her lap so her head could rest against Mia’s chest.

“Nice,” he said, drawing out the word. The baby’s steady gaze must have caught Dan’s focus again. “But really, who’s the kid?” he asked, jokingly.

“Uh, her name is Autumn,” Mia said after a slight pause and a rising intonation at the end that made Dan look at her a bit oddly. “Like the season. Because she was born in autumn. Or at the end of the summer. I think, anyway. She’s so tiny, so that’s probably around the time she was born. Her mom told me, but I forget when exactly she started existing. It would be weird, though, if her name was Autumn and she was born in the summer, though, wouldn’t it be?” Mia babbled

and worried that he was onto her. “But what about you? How has your semester been? What classes are you taking?” Mia asked, eager to get the attention off of her and her daughter.

Dan chatted about his schedule, which involved an independent study on the psychology of language, a research experience in social psychology, and a statistics course. He rattled off his plans for the spring semester—something about going abroad.

Mia twirled the paper cup between her hands, denting it with her nails. She stared down at the stains on the table that made full moons. She kept a smile pasted on her face. Mia felt light and heavy at the same time as Dan told her stories about their classmates from their General Chemistry class. Lydia had gotten caught stealing a few test tubes from the lab for a party she was throwing in her dorm; Charlie had been successfully stealing loaves of bread from the cafeteria since the beginning of the semester; Matt was raking in the money thanks to a new app he had just launched.

Mia’s eyes wandered around the café. It was mostly full of young people on identical laptops. The dark green jackets caught Mia’s eye, and she wondered if Mr. E was among them. She couldn’t picture him here. He claimed that it was hard for him to get around, but whenever she was on these assignments, she felt like he was watching her.

“You still there?” Dan asked, waving a hand in front of Mia’s eyes. She looked at him apologetically. Mia enjoyed hearing about classes and classmates, but there was also a hint of something else, something that made her have to grind her molars together to keep from yawning. Or crying. She was having a different experience entirely, a world away from books and exams and grades.

She said goodbye to Dan and slipped back into her role as a struggling new mother working as a bizarre research assistant.

“Don’t forget these,” Dan said, running over to her just as she was stepping out into the crowd, passing over the plastic bag.

“Thanks,” Mia said, relieved that she had not forgotten the eggs, but filled with an increasing uncertainty they were not the right things to deliver to the Museum. The plastic bag swung on her wrist as she hiked the baby up to get a better grip. She was swallowed into the masses of people. They carried her down the avenue, closer to her destination. She was afraid she might miss it, being moved by the relentless current that brought her farther downtown. It was lunch hour. Just as she tried to break free and turn down the street, she slipped on an advertisement that had floated down from its designated space on the wooden construction wall. She slid and stumbled down the sidewalk, raising her daughter upwards as the eggs collided with a fire hydrant.

Mia caught herself on the top of the fire hydrant, stood straight to readjust the baby, and quickly opened the carton. The perfect shells were shards, floating in pools of liquid yellow. She felt a burning sensation in her head and behind her eyes. The world was a blur of gray watercolors and runny yolk. She was not generally prone to histrionics, especially in public. But that’s all she felt like she did anymore. Since her hands were full, she could not rub the tears away. They fell down her face in steady trails, tiny sobs escaping from the corners of her lips. They were just eggs.

She kept walking, placing one foot in front of the other with her runny eyes slightly averted. She felt like she did when she was a little girl, maybe six-years-old, when she had let go of her mother’s hand in the grocery store. When she looked up, she was lost. Her mother had disappeared. Mia was alone, her heart beating wildly with the panic of being forgotten and alone in the bright white labyrinth forever, all the uniform tiles and aisles looking the same. The hot

tears of her face had blurred her vision so she could not continue to go search for her mother. She had been left standing next to the cold refrigerators holding the sliced cheeses and cartons of eggs.

She had not stayed lost for long, though. Her mother had heard her wailing from her spot in the soup aisle. She had squatted down to Mia's eye-level and gave her a hug and told her not to wander off and make her worry like that again. Mia held her daughter tighter. The baby made a few noises like a small animal, a baby bird, as if she were trying to comfort her mother. That's what Mia liked to believe anyway. She was always reading too far into things. Mia dried her eyes with the corner of her daughter's blanket and continued walking on, with a purpose, with her splotchy cheeks and red eyes alert.

Mr. E picked up on the first ring this time, as if he had been standing at the phone all morning, waiting for Mia to move along from her coffee break and get back to her job. "I have your eggs," was all she said, and he told her to gently place them into the slot. She slid the objects onto a tray inside and closed the door. "They're already broken," she said. "Sorry," she added after he made a sound of confused concern. He should figure out how to do his own groceries anyway or find another kid to help him out with that. He put her on hold for a moment.

-What is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?

-How long is forever?

-Either it brings tears to the eyes, or else—

"Thank you for that. There were a few that were still whole," he said, cutting off the recording.

She could have sworn that she heard the sizzling of a frying pan in the background. She felt

guilty for spoiling his sad meal, but it had not been her fault that she had tripped. Chance accident.

The egg carton was returned to her, with her name written across the top in bold black marker. She made a face as she picked it up, positive that Mr. E was returning the broken eggs to her for disposal, since she was already outside and near the curb. The carton was strangely light in her hands, though, as it appeared in the slot. The liquid that exploded inside had been scooped out and dried up. Whatever was inside rattled around. Mia opened the carton to reveal a dozen of colorful plastic eggs of all the shades of the rainbow.

“Remember to consistently record. I’ll see you in a few days,” Mr. E said, and the phone line disconnected with a click.



The colorful eggshells spun across the kitchen counter. Mia had popped open the one that was labeled “me first” on the walk home, unfurling a message that read, “a place beyond Patience and Fortitude.”

Mia felt her spirits lift. She didn’t know what the lines inside the rest of the eggs would say, but she knew where she needed to go. She popped open the rest of the plastic eggs and stuffed the other slips of paper into her coat pockets.

Could this job be turning into something normal? A rainbow was presented to her, and she would follow it to the center of knowledge, the pot of gold that had been waiting for her at the end. She passed Patience and Fortitude, the guardians of knowledge, regally posed at the top of the stairs. The baby looked at the steely gray lions. The stone lions did not budge from their position. Mia looked up at the marble arched entryways and crossed the threshold, passing beneath History, Philosophy, and Poetry. The arcs made her think of Dan, who would be flying

across the ocean to see the history that she craved, the paintings that made her ache to be back in school, to be having those kinds of adventures. This is what she thought she had signed up for.

Her daughter constantly held her gaze up, mesmerized by the puffy clouds against the pink and blue skies painted on the ceilings between the gilt frameworks. It was funny how they had tried to capture time, to freeze the time of day in place so the visitors of the library lost a sense of the sun rising and setting, the clouds disappearing. They had taken the ephemeral and flattened it in permanence to the ceiling. The lobby of the library was bathed in a subtle butter yellow.

There were tours going on, large groups coming to marvel at the architecture and the vast collections. Though it was crowded and ten times fancier than her local library back at home, the library still felt comforting. Just like the effect of the smell of tempera paint, Mia felt home. The spacious library swallowed her up among the crowds of whispering people, absorbed each of their stories in their faded footsteps and silent echoes. She couldn't go home, but this was what she needed right now.

Ahead of her, she saw a tall man with a plaid newsboy cap flopping out of his pocket holding hands with a small child who could barely walk up the steps. Mia felt a pang as she recalled all those times that her father had taken her to the library. They went every Saturday morning when she was little. She would select a picture book that had plenty of text so she could show off her reading skills and would find a place for them to sit. She usually chose the back corner at the tiny table with the rainbow legs to read out loud to her father. He would sit hunched with his knees sticking out at odd angles to fit into the tiny blue chairs. He would listen to her tales about space cows and bunny ballerinas, and he would let her borrow his card to take them home.

Mia turned down a corridor that had the original sketches of the library on display. There had been a design competition in 1897, and the team made up of the youngest and least experienced designers had won. Before the library existed, it had been a grave and then a reservoir. Now it was a stunning home to books. The multicolored spines stuck out to greet her. Millions of lives existed preserved within the pages until they disintegrated.

She passed by the murals that featured *The Story of the Recorded Word*, with large depictions of the Ten Commandments, a medieval monk copying a manuscript, and printing presses. Some of the paint had crackled into flaky fractures around the corners of their arched window-like frames. But instead of looking out of transparent glass to see outside, she saw the two-dimensional views of the paintings.



ISN'T IT STRANGE HOW THESE PAINTINGS HAVE LED TO THIS? THIS BOOK THAT YOU ARE HOLDING CAME OUT OF THE EVOLUTION OF CHISELING, INKING, AND HOURS OF LABOR. YOU ARE LOOKING AT A PRODUCT THAT IS THE END RESULT OF HUMAN EFFORT TO PRESERVE MERE IDEAS—PRACTICALLY NOTHING—WORDS STRUNG TOGETHER, COMBINATIONS OF THE SAME TWENTY-SIX LETTERS, SO YOU CAN SEE AND DIGEST THEM IN THIS PRESENT MOMENT.



She roamed the halls, marveling at the cavernous space. This was more like a museum than a library, or perhaps maybe it was just a museum of books, with everything too valuable to touch. Mia always viewed the two types of spaces in the same category anyway. Walking through a museum was like hopping inside of a textbook or an encyclopedia and wandering through the dense pages in a more pleasurable way. She picked up novels, anthologies, and

collections of poetry along the way, based around the folded notes of quotes she was given. The words were crumpled in her jacket pocket.

She peeked into one of the study rooms. There was an oasis of readers engrossed in their books, some wearing headphones, others quietly typing away on laptops, some taking naps with their heads down. Mia joined them, placing her stack of findings down on the glossy wooden table next to a girl carefully taking notes in a little black notebook while flipping through her own pile of weathered books with the crackling plastic coverings.

Mia cracked open a musty hardcover, trying to emulate the studious girl. She lined up the balled words from her pocket onto the table, like they were ready to launch into space with a flick of a finger. Instead she unwrapped them, smoothed them down. *Do I dare disturb the universe?* She scanned the page of her book, held open with the corner of another book, the baby balanced on her lap, the notebook from Mr. E propped open to scribble observations and analysis inside. The words of others were scattered around her. She was out of practice at being a student. She had shed that skin when she had left, and she found it hard to concentrate in the silence. Mia became aware of the stillness, the silence that she was not able to keep. It forced her to listen to the miniscule noises that she couldn't eliminate—the baby's soft breaths, the noisy static in her head. She tapped her pen against the corner of her mouth and took a deep breath in preparation to get to work. She got as far as writing the date across the top of the blank page.

The baby let out a little wail that ricocheted off the walls of the silent space. The sea of eyes emerged from behind their covers of books to look with either curiosity or hostility at the source of the sound. The studious girl did not acknowledge the girl who was possibly the same age next to her with the screaming bundle. They could have been classmates, but they were living in totally different worlds. Mia quietly shushed her daughter while bouncing her a bit

inside of her sack. Her book flipped shut; she lost her place. Their system of silent communication wasn't working, as the baby emitted another high-pitched squeal. It echoed down the halls, hitting the library patrons' ears until it was just a faint leftover of a screech that had not figured out how to escape the room. It picked up then, the noises, the crying. Mia abandoned the books. She raced down the halls, the shrieking magnified and resounding as she ran through the otherwise silent tunnels to reach the Children's Center.

The baby had calmed down enough by the time they arrived at the Children's Center. Her cries had turned into whimpers. Mia was impressed that someone so small could be so powerful without using any words at all and instead sheer willpower, pure emotion. "What was that all about, Stormy?" she wondered, staring at the sniffling little bundle. It was like a random thunderstorm had hit for a few minutes and then it was sunny again.

The Children's Center was not quite as spacious as the rest of the library, but it was cozy in the way that all children's wings of libraries are, with a dull pea green carpet worn down by muddy shoeprints and shelves full of tall and thin books like jagged, gapped baby teeth. The chairs were low to the ground and squishy like beanbags. Everything was slightly shrunken making Mia feel like she had grown a few feet after feeling like an ant in the massive tunnels of the main library building. Here she was a giant. She took a free bookmark of a rabbit wearing a hat with a large eye staring out at readers to add to Mr. E's assemblage of this trip's paraphernalia.

Mia rested her feet by sinking into a tiny traffic-cone orange chair, her knees awkwardly splayed out as she gripped a narrow book with a worn burgundy cover. She recognized the cover from when she was little. She demanded it to be read to her at bedtime over and over again, making up a different story each time. She flipped the pages for her daughter to see, her wide

eyes reflecting the pages, absorbing the rich colors. Mia began to read the story aloud in a soft voice so that only her daughter could hear.

It didn't matter much in any case because there were not many other children around. There was a little boy with thick blue glasses frames that looked like goggles and matched the pair that the cartoon character on the front of his shirt wore. He was sitting on his knees, his legs in a 'w' shape as he slid colorful beads along curled thick plastic wires. He made the occasional vrooming sound as the beads tumbled down, circling and spiraling until they hit the bottom of the wire.

A girl approached Mia, interrupting her telling of the story, and insisted, "That's not how it goes." She wiggled her way between Mia and the baby and the book. Her blonde hair tickled the baby's nose. "See, it's a fairytale, but instead of a princess, there is a bird. The bird lives by herself in the forest singing songs. She wants to become a human, but see, she's still just a bird. Then the magical witch tells her that she can be a human if she builds an egg around herself so that she can be born as a child. The bird gathers leaves and twigs and flowers to make an egg like a nest to hide inside. But then it snows and her egg collapses. The snow buries her inside, and when she gets out, she can no longer fly because she is a girl made of snow and ice. She lives in a big house, but it always has to be freezing inside so she doesn't melt. She isn't allowed to have any fun. But when she wants to fly away, her mom says she can't until she grows up.

"That's the story. That's what my grandpa told me." She finished explaining the story. Mia asked the girl her name. It was Lori.

"But there are no words in this book. There are just pictures. How do you know that my story wasn't the real story?" Mia asked.

“That’s what it shows. The bird is changed into a girl. I told my grandpa that story and he said he had never heard a better version. Besides, I know how to read,” Lori said, even though there were no words. “Are you her mommy?”

School aged kids rushed in, on a field trip, filling up the Children’s Center. They came in with the exaggerated silence of loudly whispered *shhs* and rustling coats before disappearing into the stacks. An elderly teacher stood in the center, waiting for the group to choose books and settle in a circle for story time.

“Yes, I’m her mom,” Mia said, feeling more like she was in the playroom in preschool pretending to be a mom holding a baby doll. She closed the book with a satisfying smack, gathering up her scribbly jotted notes. She stood up, waved goodbye to the little girl, and left, with a sparse handful of call numbers.



DOES IT EVER HAPPEN TO YOU? WHEN YOU READ? YOUR EYES KEEP SCANNING THE SAME SENTENCE OVER AND OVER LIKE A SCRATCH ON A RECORD THAT CAUSES IT TO REPEAT. YOUR EYES KEEP SCANNING THE SAME LINES UNTIL THEY DON’T REALLY MAKE SENSE ANYMORE. YOUR EYES KEEP SCANNING THE SAME WORDS IN SEARCH OF A DEEPER MEANING, SOMETHING PROFOUND THAT TIES THE BOOK TO THE WORLD AND MAKES THINGS MAKE SENSE. YOU PROBE THE WORDS WITH YOUR GAZE, HOPING THAT THE HIDDEN MEANING WILL SUDDENLY UNEARTH ITSELF TO RESULT IN AN EPIPHANY THAT SECURELY SNAPS THE FINAL PUZZLE PIECES TOGETHER SO YOU CAN SEE THE BIGGER PICTURE.



“Wait, I have a question,” Lori said, running back over to Mia and the baby. Her light blue dress swished as she ran. “See that clock over there?” She pointed high up on the wall. “What time is it?” she asked.

“It’s almost one thirty,” Mia said.

“But not over there,” the girl said, pointing lower to the ground, at about the height of Mia’s waist. Mia did not see what Lori was pointing at. She squinted at the distance, only seeing the shelves against the far wall.

“Come here, I’ll show you,” Lori said, grabbing Mia’s free hand and dragging her over to the other side of the reading room. It turned out that there was another little clock mounted low on the wall. It was yellow and blue, and it was plastic. It was to help children learn how to tell time. They could push around the hour and minute hands to control the time. “My grandpa said that we were going to Wonderland when the little hand is on the one and the big hand is on the five.” Lori adjusted the hands as she spoke.

“Oh, then you’re late, you’re late! Do you know where your grandpa is?” Mia asked, confused as to where Wonderland was exactly, but figured that that explained the girl’s appearance. It had not just been a coincidence that she looked just like Alice.

“I don’t know.”

Mia figured she would walk the girl over to the exhibition to check if her grandfather was waiting for her. The three left the clocks and followed the signs.



The *Alice in Wonderland* exhibition took up several rooms. “Do you see your grandpa anywhere?” Mia asked the little girl. Lori looked left and right, scanning the room but did not see her grandfather. “Alright, we should probably head back to the reading room—“

“Look!” Lori pointed up ahead. There was a sign with cards spilling outwards, floating tea sets, and suspended vials of colorful liquids. The objects moved downwards in a slow, jerky cascade. “Down the Rabbit Hole,” Lori read off the sign slowly, each words round in her mouth. “Maybe he’s gone inside,” she said. Mia wasn’t sure it was a good idea to keep walking through the rooms instead of returning to the reading room, but Lori had already dashed ahead. “He looks just like this,” Lori said, pointing to black ink etchings of the Mad Hatter. Mia considered the gigantic top hat on the Hatter’s rather large head. Stiff strands of hair poked out from beneath the hat’s rim, framing his stretched out mouth and emphasizing how small his hands were in contrast. Perhaps Lori’s grandfather liked wearing polka dot bowties and oversized hats, too? Maybe his hands were a bit too small and his head too large.

“He looks just like that when I come to visit him. Normally he just wears suspenders,” Lori said, as if that explained everything.

Mia simply nodded and tried to get the girl to head back to the reading room.

“I think we should just wait here because he has to come here anyway,” Lori said.

Mia wasn't sure about that, but she felt sucked in by the wonderful display of the early sketches of rabbits and impossible creatures behind framed glass; blue ink transcriptions of the original manuscript and handwritten letters; and the suspenseful orchestral music that seeped out from the thick headphones attached to the wall. The pages made the classic story come to life in another way, surrounding and capturing each of her senses with nonsensically absurd creatures and creations.

She stared at herself in the warped, funhouse mirror. It made her forehead huge and teeth long and stretched her torso with the baby strapped to it almost to the ground. She looked mad. All she needed was a hat. Lori laughed, and she squatted down and stood back up, distorting her features while she made faces.

“What is that?” Lori asked. There was a flickering murmuring coming from behind a dark velvet curtain. Soft music trickled beneath the curtain, dreamy but slightly off, too sharp.

“We should really be getting you to your grandpa,” Mia said, now nervous.

“No, he'll turn up,” the girl said.

“Come on, let's go see,” she said, grabbing Mia's hand and directing her towards the dark curtain. Mia wondered how she had become the adult in this situation. She could remember tugging her mother through museums in her excitement to see the biggest painting with the best, in her opinion, colors or to seek out anything familiar that she had seen in the library books that she read with her dad. The clammy hand tugging on her own warm hand, though, was not her

own. She was the owner of the Adult Hand, the one that was dragged along at a slower pace, more hesitant, more cautious. But she still felt the same curiosity as Lori as she allowed herself to be tugged along.

Behind the curtain, a white screen was transformed as a flickering black and white movie played to the whirring of the film reel. Quiet strains from the orchestrations that ran through the headphones trickled out thinly from the speakers in the corners. A large white rabbit came to life from the etched images as he hopped across the screen dressed in a suit. It was like he was avoiding the ink of the pages by moving away from the dark room and further into the bright screen, away from Mia and the baby and Lori. The images flickered in and out, but the trio was captivated all the same. The white spaces bothered Mia, the blank spaces running onto the screen like spilled milk, bits of outer space, a leaking moon that was melting into the galaxy of absurd motion.

Bulky animals that looked like large puppets wandered through fields of tall grasses that reminded Mia of camping trips that her family went on when she was little. Lobsters stiffly walked upright, taking half steps in their suits of hardened papier-mâché. They waddled through the grass and then appeared as if they had traveled through time and space suddenly on the sepia beach. A cat flashed on the screen, up in a tree, and was quickly gone.

“That’s the Cheshire cat,” Lori said. She grinned and moved in closer to the baby to show off her teeth. Mia could have sworn she heard a tiny meow. She walked closer to the screen, the only illuminated surface in the black box of a room with a heavy curtain that separated them from reality. “See him? See him?” Lori grew more excited, but the cat had poofed off the screen in the crudely edited shot. Lori’s voice had shifted so it was not coming from Mia’s left hand

side anymore either. It was absorbed into the carpeted floor. A shadow brushed Mia's ankle. Lori was crawling around on the ground. "Meow, meow," she imitated a cat as she circled Mia's legs.

As Mia's eyes readjusted to the darkness, she realized that Lori was not alone down there. *Meow*. A gray cat blended perfectly into the darkness of the room like a shadow, and Mia just began to see his outline.

The baby scrunched her hands, like she was petting the darkness.

"Lori?" a thin voice cut through the darkness, and gloved hand appeared from the other side like a magic trick. A man in a large purple top hat wobbled in. His satin polka dot bowtie in garish colors shone even in the dark.

"Grandpa!" Lori scooped up the cat and stood up.

"I just finished with story time down the hall," the man said. Mia noticed the large picture book in his hand. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland: The Illustrated Edition*. "I'm happy you found your way into Wonderland." He turned to Mia. "Hello," he said, just noticing her as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. "Nice to meet you. I'm the Hatter." He shook her hand with his tiny white gloves. "In exchange for watching my granddaughter," he said and plucked his hat from his head and withdrew an *Alice* pamphlet.

"Thank you," Mia said.

"Wait till you get home to read it. Come along, Lori. Bring Charles." Before Mia could ask why she had to wait until she had returned home to look at the *Alice in Wonderland* pamphlet, the Mad Hatter and the small Lori disappeared behind the velvet curtain, leaving only the faint impression of the gray cat's meows.

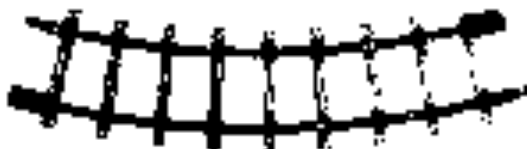
The *Alice* pamphlet was not quite what it seemed. It was an envelope made out of an *Alice* pamphlet. Mia toyed with the torn corner on the subway back home, but could not figure out what rested inside. A note? A letter? This had to be the work of Mr. E. She had had a few strange occurrences since moving to the city, but nothing like this. It sounded magical, to be handed envelopes in libraries to lead to another clue, to be out on a quest while doing ‘research’ for a reclusive author. But Mia instead felt progressively uneasy as Mr. E mapped out her locations and set up a network of strangers to interact with Mia to do his job. She was getting to see the city but at the cost of this constant paranoia, the feeling of his gaze wherever she went.

She replayed the voice of the Mad Hatter again. His voice was too high-pitched and jolly to be Mr. E. As soon as she got inside her room, she sliced open the envelope. It was an invitation to a gallery opening this coming Thursday printed on thick cream cardstock with M.R.E’s initials written in curlicue script. He had crossed it out and scratched Mia’s name across the top. Mia flopped into a chair. She would love to go to a gallery opening, but she didn’t know anyone who could watch the baby while she was gone. She hoped that this wasn’t one of Mr. E’s games—find somewhere to hide the baby so she could look at paintings for a few hours. Was it a social experiment? See what the young, new, and probably irresponsible mother will do to her child in order to reenter civilization and feel her age again? Mia shook her head, stuffed the invitation back into the envelope, and tucked the baby in for the night.



THE DISTORTION OF THE WORDS STRETCHES ACROSS THE PAGE LIKE A FUNHOUSE MIRROR
AS YOU ENTER INTO THE GLASS AND THE WORLD BECOMES SOMETHING OTHER.





In the morning, Mia delivered the scribbles on T.S. Eliot and Mallarmé, the fragmented scraps of paper from the eggs with all their blank spaces that puzzled her, and a picture encyclopedia of New York City for children between the ages of three to seven to Mr. E's drop box.

"Ha, ha," was his dry response when he picked up the phone and saw what she had delivered. "No further notes?"

"Nope," Mia said. "The baby decided to have a tantrum. I thought the book would give you more insight to this city than I could, anyway. The illustrations of the taxis are something." They were drawn in scribbly yellow crayon.

"But the baby always seems so calm. What's her name?" Mr. E asked, setting Mia's heart racing and the blush crawling up her cheeks.

"You can call her Vie."

"Vie. I have a babysitter in mind for Vie so you can complete your next task tomorrow night."

Mia quickly insisted that she would manage to find someone, fearing that all of Mr. E's acquaintances were not ideal candidates to watch her daughter for the first time, nor was he. He certainly was not. "I can call my friend's grandma. It's not problem," she added. She flipped through her mental list of contacts. Sadie, her former roommate, had been invaluable in convincing her grandmother to let Mia occupy her empty apartment while she traveled the world and settled in Florida for the winter. Surely her grandma would have other nice little old ladies that would be willing to babysit her daughter—ones who knit or were part of book clubs or ate stale cough drops like candy and who did not spend all their free time sending babies around New York to gage their reaction when cats appear out of thin air and libraries are portals to fairytales.

"Well, be sure to arrive at six and say hello to the woman who is the cat analyst," the phone crackled, and Mia wasn't sure that she had heard that last phrase correctly. "Outside of the house."

"The cat analyst? Which house?" Mia asked, but he had already hung up.

The cat analyst—which Mia supposed could be a psychologist for cats, similar to a horse whisperer—was impossible to find. The gallery itself was nearly impossible to find, down a winding sidewalk that veered off the main road. Mia would have missed it if she had not spotted a small, interesting looking group. The group was made up of people who were only a few years older than her, at most, either students or recent graduates. The group was clad either in all black with heavy boots or clashing prints and textures that hung loosely from their skinny bodies like kites.

She eyed one of the girls who stood out with her poufs of pastel pink hair and a mismatched knitted scarf that took over half her face. She was wearing a navy blue velvet skirt that nearly touched the floor and a flannel shirt that peeked out from a coat that looked like a bathmat. She had on gloves that matched her skirt that clutched an envelope, probably bearing an invitation like the one Mia had rolled up in her own sweaty coat pocket.

Mia tilted her head forward so that her hair swung in front of her face. With her dark hair and clothes, she could nearly fade into the night. She was dressed in all black, but not in the same way that the kids in the group were dressed. Her black clothes were faded to a dirty gray, stretched out, and faintly stained with spit up. But this was her most acceptable outfit to wear out in public. She had noticed that her wardrobe had increasingly grown dark, and she wondered what had happened to her array of clothes that came in the rich hues of viridian, burnt umber, and alizarin crimson. She had worn her ultramarine blue flats in the early fall, but within a week, the gray of the city seeped into them until they matched the shade of skyscrapers in overcast winter. She did not have to make any choices this way, with her new uniform off city camouflage. It was one less decision for Mia to make every morning with her precious amount of energy. Or perhaps it was simply because the rest of her clothes were too hard to clean at this point, all tinged with the same gray after such a short time. She had put on the faintest trace of makeup in a futile effort to erase her evident worry and attempt to work herself up to the excitement of having an evening out where she could pretend to have her life back to normal again.

The baby was with an aunt. Sadie came through again. Sadie had an aunt who lived in Brooklyn. The aunt had two little boys of her own. She invited Mia into her spacious home. It was full of light inside, even though the sky had turned navy. Mia was impressed and repulsed

by the framed professional baby photos blown up on the wall that showed the boys when they were wriggly little humans, angelic and asleep. It smelled like home, like cinnamon and clean laundry and something else that she couldn't quite identify but it put her at ease. There were a few toys strewn across the floor, while the rest were put away in bins along the wall. The carpet was otherwise spotless. A salt and pepper terrier greeted Mia by hopping up on her knee. She felt a pang of homesickness that she was good at evading with her sense of guilt and anxiety most of the time. But being in the warm house, full of life and chaos and tiny pattering footsteps made her want to go home.

Going home, in Mia's mind, would be a failure. She would have to prove to her parents and herself that she could take care of everything and provide for her daughter. She could be an adult. She could take responsibility and prove that she was capable not only of living in this city alone but also managing everything that she had created.

The group of students chattered and made their way to the gallery, located where the sidewalk ended. Mia followed a good distance behind, worried that they could see her tailing them. They reminded her of her classmates—the studio art ones, not the chemistry majors. They didn't look back. Mia was able to disappear behind the heavy black door of the gallery completely unnoticed.

The inside of the gallery was not one of those open spaces that was broken into smaller rooms by wall partitions. Mia had expected to enter inside and see white walls covered in framed abstract paintings or maybe some odd contemporary sculptures made from recycled materials with spotlights highlighting the art. There would be strange but sophisticated couples roaming about and sipping glasses of wine while bantering about the possible meaning of the artworks.

This gallery did not align with the image in her mind. Instead, it looked like the backstage of a theater. There were wooden beams sitting in sawdust pushed off to the side and paint spatters on the concrete ground. The rickety steps were improvised planks of wood screwed together that led up to an interior door, also painted the darkest shade of black possible. No light escaped. There was a small line of people that trailed from one closed door, down the steps, to the other closed door.

“Next group,” a tall, stick skinny boy called out, motioning a hand forward for the next group of six to step up. “Have your invitations out. No photos, no recording devices of any kind. Stay on the tape, and please leave all your bags here,” he said, motioning to a crate on the ground. Mia did not have any bags, feeling strangely light without the baby strapped to her chest. The buoyancy was freeing, but also made her panic every time she realized that her daughter was not present. The lightness mostly made her feel untethered like a balloon floating upwards towards outer space. She folded her arms across her stomach. “You’ll have three minutes inside before you have to exit through the other side and enter into the main gallery.”

She held out her crinkled invitation, which the boy accepted before slipping it into the slit of a large black box next to the interior black door. When he cracked open the door, a slice of swirling light spilled out. Mia was unable to catch more than a sliver of what was inside, though. She would just have to find out what she was there to see once she was in the middle of it.

The door opened all the way, and she followed the small group that included the students she had seen earlier. The lights had been turned off, so they entered into the dark space. She didn’t trust the sound of the clacking, hollow ground beneath her as the footsteps of the group echoed around. She rocked forward on her feet with her gaze pointed downwards, following the

glow-in-the-dark tape on the floor. A glimmer of the exhibit moved at the same time that she did. And then the spotlights flooded the space, washing the group in an unsettling green light.

They were in a garden of glass. The room was round and domed like a snow globe, a perfect sphere that made her feet slide precariously beneath her. She was walking on nothing but a layer of glass, and she could see the real floor—dirty and paint-spattered—below her, removed, so she only existed within the pure artwork. She stepped carefully so as not to slide into the giant transparent flowers that looked like ice sculptures that filled the room. The flowers curled up the walls like vines, looming downwards from the ceiling. Others bloomed from the ground with their petals curling into the walls and melting into the floor. They had spotted designs, with curling stems and protruding, fragile thorns. They looked deadly with the points that stuck out needle sharp in all directions. That was why the exhibit did not need ropes to block off areas. Besides, heavy ropes would take the viewer out of the immediate experience. These sculptures came with their own built-in protection. The viewer could not get too sucked into the art. They would damage the flowers, crush the thorns while getting pierced if they looked too closely.

Mia looked around, feeling disoriented as her eyes saw through the green glass that was quickly shifting to red. The other people in the room wavered as they moved around the sphere. Mia felt dizzy as she cautiously circled around the flowers, making sure her feet did not stray from the faint tape. She leaned in to examine the speckled pattern of the glass. Actual flower petals were suspended within the glass flowers, along with butterflies with unfurled wings. They were frozen in flight. The lights flooded magenta, and she saw the people on the other side with owl eyes and elongated hands. They wobbled around like running watercolors, body parts expanding and retracting back to normal as they moved, as she saw them through the glass medium and then directly again. Time was up.

The lights stopped flashing colors, and she saw everything as clear, transparent glass. It was the most disturbing vision of the room, the most disorienting of all. At least the colors shone through the artwork like paint, but once that element was subtracted, the flowers were empty and it was nearly impossible to tell who and what was made of glass. She left the hot sphere and entered into the main part of the gallery.

The garden grew outward from the sphere in the form of shiny silver trees and hedges. They created tunnels that reflected on themselves since they were made of mirrored glass. Everything was backwards and forwards, like being in a funhouse and a cornfield maze at the same time, neither of which Mia enjoyed. At least she knew that she would safely be deposited out on the other side and led into the next room without hitting any dead ends. The people in front of and behind her made faces in the wavy mirrors and took pictures. Mia looked around, trying to figure out what she was really seeing, what she was looking at. A kneecap. An earlobe. A scrap of curly red hair. A bony elbow. The swish of yellow pants. A golden purse clasp.

She looked straight ahead to see a girl, so small. Smaller than she remembered. She was wearing a mask of herself, hardened and expressionless, her mouth a straight line across her face and her eyebrows pinched together to create a faint line right in the middle of her forehead. The eyes were empty behind her glasses. She blinked. The girl in the reflection blinked. The mask slipped and she saw herself, just for a second.

She left the maze and climbed a flight of metal stairs that led to a nest. She stood up in the hollowed out space. It filled up an entire room. There were enormous hands holding it a few feet off the ground. A mirror was nailed high on the wall on the opposite side of the room for the spectators to see themselves situated in the massive nest, which was made up of iron sculpted into tangles of twiglike letters, jumbles of nonsense. An 'R' wrapped around the side of the nest,

curving diagonally so the pointed tip of the top left corner of the letter jugged out. The round top sloped downwards like a slide. Capital and lowercase letters blended together. The white walls of the room were nearly invisible through the empty spaces between the layers of letters. Mia moved to the center of the nest, her hand trailing over the smooth, cool metal, jumping over the edges of the alphabet.

She looked in the mirror. She was just a dot, a speck on the smooth surface. Her head poked above an 'x.' She snapped a picture on her phone. The camera lens pointed at the reflection, the potential words duplicated and reversed. Then she clanged down the metal steps to exit the nest room.

She had not seen the cat analyst yet, unsure of what to expect. Mia wasn't even sure she would recognize what a cat analyst would look like if she spotted one. Did cat psychologists wear lab coats? Scrubs printed with cats on them? She looked around the next room uncertainly. It looked fun.

The ground was made of tall grasses that smelled like summer. Swing sets, merry-go-rounds, and slides grew out of the grass, inviting viewers to play. But then there were also mirrors and cameras that peeked out everywhere. Mia immediately thought of the CCTV camera mounted to the wall outside the Museum, along with its multiplicity of mirrored shelves inside. She was overcome with the feeling that Mr. E was watching her. Here. She was being paranoid.

She kept her head down, stealing sideways glances at the camera sculpture in the center of the room. She wanted to get past it quickly, without another thought, moving onto the next exhibit in the cul-de-sac of rooms, but this camera and mirror sculpture unsettled her in a way that also piqued her curiosity. It was like her daughter's newfound fascination with her own reflection. Mia sat her daughter on the bathroom counter while she got ready for bed each night.

She would point at the baby's reflection and ask, "Who's that? Who's over there?" and her daughter would stare and sometimes reach forward to trace her fingers over her own face, not yet realizing that she was her.

Mia also felt this same feeling when she had first discovered the Museum. She always had this feeling when she was around it, one of overpowering curiosity that annulled any fears about being watched or followed. She thought that if she at least had an awareness of being watched, no one could ever truly violate her sense of privacy.

In this room of the exhibition, there were cameras mounted on the walls, pointed in every direction. They each had a single black bug-eye, glassy and vacant. They created such a disturbing sense of *1984* inside this playground. No one else seemed to have a hard time running through the grass and racing down the slides, though. In the center of the room, a harsh spotlight shone down between a twisting, climbing contraption made of rope. It looked like a cage, and above the cage was a ring of cameras mounted on stands and tilted downwards. People had taken off their shoes and climbed into the center of the strings to take pictures of the cameras with them in the middle of it all. Above them was a mirror, on the ceiling, the all-seeing eye, above the cameras. It all made Mia dizzy to think about, how the viewers looked through screens at the lenses of the cameras, which looked back onto them. Mia did not want to stand in the center of the cameras. She could not tell whether they were switched on or off, their cold gaze still and unyielding. There was a ticking coming from the next room, faintly seeping through the walls, between the footsteps of the visitors. Perhaps the next room would have rows of TVs, the screens that corresponded to the eyes.

Mia conducted her own surveillance, staring at the ceiling, looking for someone out of the ordinary who might be the cat analyst that Mr. E had told her to meet. The problem with

trying to find someone out of the ordinary at an art gallery was the shifting meaning of ‘ordinary.’ Would the meaning flip here? Would the person dressed in plain clothes be the odd one out? Or would it be someone so outrageous that it would be extremely apparent? There was a woman in a blazer and slacks on the swings. There was another one with her hair piled on top of her head and wrapped beneath a bright orange scarf. There was another in jeans and a sweatshirt. Mia stopped watching the cameras and walked into the last room.

A house sat planted in the liminal doorway between two rooms: the surveillance room and the final room of the gallery. The house was glass, made up of multicolored panes that came in different sizes. Blue, red, yellow, and white aligned and fused together. There was nothing inside the house but empty space and light. It served as a tunnel for the viewer to walk through. The glass house created colorful rose tinted shadows like pixels that stretched across the wood floor.

Mia thought that her daughter would enjoy the colorful lights on the ground. She had recently become fascinated by the early morning light and sunset that streamed through the windows. Her hands could create the pictures on the walls. When the baby would wake Mia up in the early morning, Mia would sometimes tell her stories by creating shadow puppets. She would usually make rabbits and wolves to devour her daughter’s hands, which created unformed, little flowers. They bloomed whenever she unclenched her doughy fists.

The glass house had an accompanying glass mailbox. Mia saw an old lady in a pink coat shuffle towards the mailbox, peer inside, prop the flag, and close it. She had strings of bright green and purple beads around her neck that looked like candy. Her thick eyeglasses magnified her eyes so that they were twice their normal size and appeared to be more watery around the edges.

Mia felt her hands twitch and clench at her sides as her frustration grew. *Do not touch the art.* The last rooms had been interactive, but it did not look like this one was. There were clear taped lines on the floor and ropes to keep the visitors on the path. There were no security guards stationed in any of the rooms. The old lady once again came forward again, opened the mailbox, looked inside, flicked up the flag, and then shut it. It was like she was expecting a letter to magically appear inside the transparent multicolored box. Or for her message to be delivered. She did not even need to open it, though, as she could just look through the bits of glass to see if anything had changed.

But then Mia noticed the string that was attached to the flag, a thin silver wire that was nearly invisible. The increasingly loud clicks and whirs greeted her once she left the house to fully enter into the next room. They were the same noises that she had heard on the other side of the wall in the surveillance room.

The string on the mailbox flag played piano keys far overhead—the piano was suspended from the high ceiling—releasing a vibration that set off the eighty-eight various accompanying objects. Each reaction began on the ceiling, and the next key would only be pressed when the effects of the previous one had finished. Mia looked up in amazement at the spoons, toy trucks on plastic tracks, film reels, miniature train tracks, records, teapots, paintings, radios, cameras, and hippopotamus dangling from the walls and the ceiling. Between them were hundreds of other small objects, either attached or hanging from the ceiling that would soon be activated as kinetic motion took over and set off the chain of reactions that spiraled downwards to all different corners of the room. She watched, mesmerized, as cymbals clashed together at the end of the current sequence. The sound echoed around the room, looking for somewhere to escape.

The old woman was not a random crazy person. She was part of the exhibition. The catalyst. Cat analyst. Mia smirked at her own mistake. She hadn't had to talk to anyone in a long time, not since she had left school, not really. When she had done her various job stints, she occasionally had to make small talk, but she rarely had to truly converse with anyone for more than a few minutes. But now, Mr. E was sending her on these excursions where she had to interact with other people. She had forgotten what her own voice sounded like at a normal volume. She whispered around her daughter, spoke in low tones when they were home alone. "Excuse me." Her voice tasted funny, much too high and thin.

"You want to know how the machine works, dear?" Mia looked at the mailbox. She knew how they worked. "It's a Rube Goldberg Machine, and it all moves outwards from here." She pointed at the mailbox flag, a bit of red glass. "Here you see how insignificant the origin is compared to the rest of the reaction. As you'll see, the little things on the ceiling will play out, slowly building up to shoot off rockets and eventually smash this house." Mia followed the woman's pointed finger around the room, first to the bottle rockets which would spit out parachutes, sending the energy both behind the rocket at launch time and downwards once the parachute landed.

"The house will be destroyed?" Mia had already fallen in love with the little glass house, perfect with its watercolor panes and kaleidoscope shadows. The baby would love it, but soon it would lay in a million little pieces shattered on the ground.

"In approximately four hours, thirty-seven minutes, and eighteen seconds," the lady responded after staring down at her watch. "The countdown is also right there," she said. She pointed to the chaotic back wall, where a series of colorful plastic balls created a rainbow in a pulley machine. "A ball is added to the bucket every hour. It's scooped up from the fountain

below,” she said, and Mia saw the birdbath, which contained a handful of plastic balls. “Once a rainbow is created, the bucket will spill, sending off the series of grandfather clocks that will eventually help to also destroy the house.” She said this with an excitement to her voice, her wide eyes growing wider and brighter, making her seem younger like a child instead of aged with wisdom and time. Mia nodded, not quite feeling excited about the ultimate act of destruction.

“But why? After all this work, to build the house, to set this up.”

The old woman shrugged. “Kara Gideon has always been quite destructive with her work. The larger scale works are already set to be sent to an outdoor sculpture park somewhere upstate, where they will eventually succumb to the elements.” Mia thought of the nest of letters rusting away in the forest, covered in dirt and worms. It was pristine in its current location. Her hands again twitched, wanting to preserve everything in its current state. She did not want the machine to break the house.

“There’s always the chance that something will go wrong, though,” Mia noted, staring at the strings swinging overhead, a bucket of paint swinging and sloshing into the square marked in blue tape on the floor. The old woman squinted at Mia from behind her glasses.

“What did you say your name was, dear?”

“Mia.”

“Constance. You see the irony?” She seemed to be absorbed in watching the chain of events, but then asked, “How did you get an invite to the opening? I heard that Kara was quite selective this time with who she was allowing in this first night.” Mia at first was disappointed to learn that the artist behind these works was a woman named Kara and not Mr. E. She had hoped

that she could talk to Constance more about him, maybe get more information about the reclusive author. She decided to answer Constance's question with a question.

“Do you know anyone by the initials M.R.E?”

Constance considered her for a moment, her brow wrinkling. “It rings a bell. A broken bell sunken in a lake, but it sounds familiar?” she shrugged.

“Never mind, then.” Maybe he was a friend of the artist. “Are you friends with Kara Gideon?”

“She was my neighbor years ago, when she was a little girl. She would sometimes come over and bang on my piano and sing. Her parents and I kept in touch over the years after they moved from the Upper West Side to New Jersey. She called me up on the phone, though, a few months back, and she said that she was looking for someone to spend opening day in the gallery to propel her installation. Of course I said that I'd love to. I haven't played piano in years since I had to sell my piano. Kara said that she'd give me the piano up there once the machine finished.” Mia considered the piano, a key pinging each time Constance pulled the mailbox flag. It slowly rose again as the reverberation from a high E tapered off and a balloon floated into a basketball hoop. “It's for you.” A clean white note had appeared in the mailbox while Mia had been busy talking to Constance. After all that checking, nothing, nothing, and then something.



IS THIS A LOG TO THE CITY? AN ODE TO MANHATTAN? A LIST THAT CAN BE DRAWN INTO A MAP OF PLACES? *THE ARCADES PROJECT* FOR NEW YORK ON A SMALLER SCALE? YOU COULD TAKE THIS BOOK AND FOLLOW IT AROUND. I'VE SEEN IT DONE BEFORE, GUIDED TOURS BASED AROUND BOOKS. STORIES, NOVELS, FICTION TELLING PEOPLE WHERE TO GO. THIS DOES NOT SPEAK OF SETTINGS THAT ARE THE SAME IN REALITY AS IN THIS FORM. THIS NEW YORK IS DIFFERENT FROM

THAT NEW YORK. HERE IT IS FLAT, BLACK AND WHITE. THE IMAGE SLOWLY COMES INTO 3D AS THE POSTCARD IS BLURRED INTO SHAPES AND THE BUILDINGS BECOME CLEARER. BLACK AND WHITE. THE VIEWER MUST READ BETWEEN THE LINES TO SEE A CITY TAKING SHAPE BETWEEN THE SPACES BETWEEN THE LETTERS AND THE SURROUNDING WHITE OF THE PAGE.

IF YOU COME CLOSER, YOU CAN SEE IT IN THE MARGINS AND BETWEEN THE WORDS—ARE YOU LOOKING? CAN YOU SEE THE CITY SLOWLY COMING INTO CLEARER VIEW, GAINING THAT EXTRA DIMENSION THAT BRINGS IT INTO REALITY? THE PAPER PEOPLE RUN UP AND DOWN THE SPINE OF THE PAGE, AND I FOLLOW. I SEE WHERE THEY MOVE FROM ABOVE THE MAP, AND I TRACE THEIR PATHS. I SPEAK OF THE ROUTINE OF THEIR DAYS, EACH ONE SMALL ENOUGH TO DISAPPEAR ENTIRELY UNDERNEATH MY THUMB AS I COVER WHAT IS WRITTEN.



A few days passed as Mia attempted to figure out how to present the gallery to Mr. E. She enjoyed her quiet life, the calm of living with her daughter in her small room. There was nothing concrete to give to him, nothing solid to report beyond her fleeting impressions that were now becoming increasingly fuzzy. She had heard that each time a memory is recalled, the more distant it becomes the original actuality. Did that mean the forgotten memories were the purest? Could they even be considered memories if they couldn't be recollected? She shook her head as she sat on the floor with her back against her small bed in the apartment. The baby lay flat on her back on the bed, staring up at the white ceiling.

Mia's ceiling at home was covered in glow-in-the-dark stars that her father had stuck on with poster putty when she was very little and afraid of the dark. She always thought of them, of pretending to find constellations, making up shapes and patterns to herself and to her parents when they came into her room to say goodnight. She had a flashlight on her bedside table to

point at individual stars, to make certain ones shine brighter. She made up various constellations while staring at the ceiling when she tried to fall asleep by her bedtime on school nights. She would pull the covers up to her chin and trace the shapes with her fingers. She thought that she saw animals in the randomly scattered stars—a dragon that wrapped above her window, a little mouse, a plump goose. Staring at the empty ceiling made her eyes hurt, and sometimes she would have to touch the wall to still it from appearing as if it were moving to close in on her.

It didn't help that the stars were invisible in the city. She instead held her daughter upright in the evenings while looking out the window, pointing out various lit up buildings like they were stars. In the beginning, when she had first moved, she had trouble sleeping—sometimes because of the baby, sometimes not. She would stay up until sunrise on some nights. At 2 a.m., she would crane her neck to see the tip of the Empire State building and make a wish as the light went out. She hadn't done it in a while because her wishes had become confusing. She was no longer in a place where she could be sure of what she wanted anymore. She wanted to stay here in this cocoon with her daughter; she wanted to return home. Where was home anymore? She didn't know what she was looking for or the next move to make.

When she was in school, she had been an excellent student, constantly propelling herself towards an idea of forward. She knew what she had wanted then. All of her classes gave her direction. The tests and papers gave her a sense of order. The bombardment of knowledge, of facts and formulas filled her mind so she felt like she was making progress. The prospect of internships and jobs had given her checkpoints to reach to ensure that she was moving in the right direction. She had been so busy, so incredibly busy, that she didn't have time for much else besides going to class, doing her homework, working at the library, and meeting with professors during office hours. Sadie had thought that Mia was going to burn out.

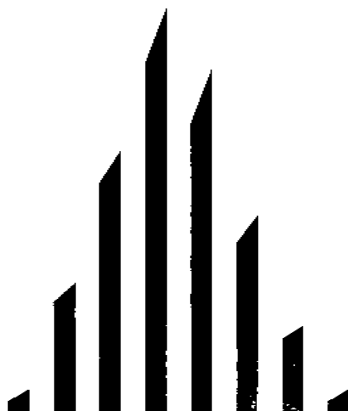
Curiosity, though, and the feeling that though she was excelling at learning, she was not excelling at college. She was not getting everything out of her four years. And that made her make some stupid choices. In high school, she had had her couple of friends, but they weren't the kinds of friends who came to her house for sleepovers or friends who went out to dinners. They were good homework partners, people who checked answers together and provided casual conversations before class started. She had her best friend from childhood, but she had moved away and Mia had been drifting from Zoey ever since. Her mother had assured her that college would be better. College would be the place where Mia would excel. And she did excel. Academically. But there were things besides grades. She didn't want to be a workaholic, exactly. She wanted to make friends who she would keep for life, to go to a party, to do something crazy. There were some things that couldn't be taught in a classroom.

She assured herself that college, if not the time of her life, would at least be a fresh start. She had made a secret list while she was still at home. She had allowed herself this single immature act of making a list of irresponsible, silly, foolish things she wanted to experience while she was away at school, while she was still a kid. To get herself to act on these things was another story. She may have had the opportunity to transform herself along with all the other incoming freshmen; she could have become the girl who did all the things on that list. But she knew that she couldn't stray far from herself, from her tendencies that she had had all her life. She would always be that kid with the neatly organized desk and the color-coordinated notes.

Her daughter had derailed her, but at the same time, she did not dream of wishing her away. She wished her to the future, to another time in her life, but that was not how reality worked. Time is tricky like that. The lens of perception alters its constancy. She had been numb

to reality for quite some time, since she started college. Leaving home had left her drifting. School grounded her. Her parents grounded her. Familiarity made her feel sane and safe. Leaving that territory of familiarity shook up the foundations, certainty, until she was left on wobbly feet to move forward and make choices that were beyond her capacity to fully grasp. It was like a game now. She knew that there would be consequences because she was now almost entirely responsible for herself, for her life. But those consequences did not feel the same as when her life was directed by her parents or dictated by her teachers. She did not know what to do with all of her freedom. Her daughter had ungrounded her and grounded her again.

The Museum assignments grounded her, somewhat. She was still floating in the liminal space where she was removed from reality because how could this be her life? But she could still feel and experience it happening around her. It just didn't fit right anymore. She didn't fall into place. The assignments were more frustrating than chemistry homework, than spending hours mixing the right hue for a color theory assignment. The message from the glass mailbox said that she had to visit the hub of the city where the light shines the brightest. Mia buried her face into her hands thinking of the myriad of possible options.



She had not turned in anything to Mr. E in over a week, unsure of what to give him to tell about her trip to the gallery. She had tried to sketch out a few images from memory, but they were coming out wrong. What she visualized in her mind was not appearing on the page. She let the black ink drip across the surface, allowing it to melt into fluid shapes and blotches that looked like a Rorschach test. She saw the letters of the nest, even though the lines didn't actually form any clear letters. He wouldn't know what to make of the abstract ink painting, but it was the best she could do. She left it aside to dry while pulling out the message that was supposed to lead her to the next assignment again. At this rate, there would be nothing to fill the Museum.

She rummaged through the front pocket of her suitcase, where she collected and accumulated tickets and receipts and papers she didn't know what to do with but felt like she shouldn't discard yet. She grabbed her used train ticket that had brought her to New York from when she had left school and added it to his folder. He could display this. This is what she had seen. This had been her experience and what she had been thinking about since the day she had arrived.

"I think we're due for a trip," Mia said to her daughter. They both needed to get out of the apartment, even though Mia felt much more comfortable being inside. She felt the beginning

of the exhaustion that she felt whenever she had to navigate through the city, the crowds and stores and lights draining her energy. Mia pulled out the baby's carrier, strapping it on after getting the bag of necessities together, full of diapers, the supplies from Mr. E, her map of the city.

They took the N train up to the madness of Times Square. The ride wasn't terribly long, but it was long enough for a guy with a guitar to start strumming and singing. He was drowned out by the coats muffling his music and the roar of the train as they sped along. Mia observed the shift as more tourists got on and more people paid attention to the kid playing music. She was a resident tourist, she supposed, not quite a local yet, but numb to those displays asking for attention. She felt disappointed in herself that things that were out-of-the-ordinary had become so commonplace. This city granted everyone anonymity.

The doors opened, and Mia exited with her daughter snuggled to her chest, breathing in the cacophony of scents in the tunnel. There was another world beneath the streets. A saxophone emitted a sweet note that followed Mia down the subway tunnel as she looked to find the exit. This was one of the longest, most complicated networks below. She followed the signs and eventually found herself aboveground, blinded by the oversized screens displaying flashy advertisements, announcements, and news. Constant news. Shaved head. Sunglasses. A teddy bear backpack. An open guitar case full of quarters. Tassels. Characters. Sports drinks. Her senses were overwhelmed, though she had been here before. She kept her daughter's face shielded so she wouldn't have to face all the lights.

"I'm not really sure what we're supposed to do here," Mia said quietly, to her daughter, to herself. She walked around beneath the screens, her eyes hurting from the shock. An army of Elmos stood in the center of it all, none the original. Their round eyes followed Mia down the

street as she fought her way through the crowds of people that were drifting around the city at a snail's pace with backpacks full of snacks and their arms linked together to take up the whole sidewalk. A few of the Elmos had taken their heads off, to reveal their worn human faces beneath the matted red fur. They broke the illusion.

Mia speed walked through the slow-moving crowds, fighting against molasses and wasting energy on moving against the current. She was able to slip through pockets of space and duck under shop fronts to continue moving uptown. A huge screen displayed the spectators below. Everyone was amused by his or her own appearance. Mia could not find herself among the clusters of people waving at themselves.

She bounced the baby slightly to see if she could identify herself via her daughter. She saw the red bouncing bundle off to the left side of the screen. Behind her, a man in a green jacket swung a camera around his neck. He shifted it from hand to hand. She heard him fumbling with his camera behind her, and she instantly felt uneasy about his presence. She moved away from the crowd and from herself.

This was not the kind of place to take a baby. New York City as a whole was not the place. It was full of smoke and pollution and things that were gray not by choice but by default, even though it was dressed up to look like the holidays. The day after Halloween officially kicked off the holiday season, as indicated by the decorations that seemed to crop up overnight. But they were not the same cheerful lights that she remembered from a family vacation long ago, when her parents took her to see the store windows along Fifth Avenue to wait in the never-ending line to see Santa at Macy's; she remembered marveling at the Rockefeller Center tree and wedging her way into the packed skating rink. That was the postcard image of New York, and

now she was living it and finding out that that flattened image was not what was really here. The multiple dimensions of reality marred those perfect, still images.

The lights made Mia think about the dilemma of the holidays. Not only was she too broke to buy her parents a decent gift—not that they were the kind of people who would expect anything elaborate—but she would, for more pressing reasons, still have to figure out how avoid going home. She had not gone home for Thanksgiving in years, but Christmas was another story. They spent Christmas Eve together, just the three of them. But on Christmas day, her extended family gathered for dinner and presents and stories. None of her extended family was related. They were made up of an assortment crafted by her parents. Certain neighbors had become close friends, her mother's friends were her aunts, friends they had made through Chinese adoptee organizations were now like cousins. She would miss gathering with them, but she could not see them; she could not give away her secret. She would return home to be looked at with judgment and questions. She didn't think her parents would do that, but she couldn't deal with the shame herself, and she did not want to be ashamed of her daughter.

The cold weather had made her hands numb and her mind frozen in its paralysis of progress. She could not move forward. She could not figure out what Mr. E had wanted her to find. Mia entered into a coffee shop to warm up and think. She sat alone at an open table in the back. She sunk into one of the stiff wooden chairs. She kissed her daughter's head, her soft patch of dark hair that had been there since birth. Mia's mother had put bows and barrettes in her hair when she had been a baby. She had always had a head of thick, dark hair.

Mia always admired those people who could sit totally alone at restaurants, enjoying a meal for one, just their thoughts for company. Some of them read, some people-watched. She was thankful that she had her daughter with her, even though she was not yet a conversationalist

at only two and a half months, because the city was lonely. No one had ever warned her about that. That never came across in movies and books about Manhattan. There was a crippling sense of loneliness amid all the people, the endless streams of crowds that seemed to pour out of every doorway, fill up entire sidewalks. So many people, yet everyone was so isolated in their own headspace that it was nearly impossible to break those blinders of separation.

Her parents could make friends so easily. People from the Midwest were just friendlier. Chicago was just a smaller, cleaner, friendlier New York, yet Mia had traded cities anyway. It wasn't that Mia was afraid to talk to other people, but she was afraid of revealing anything more about herself. She couldn't be open anymore, not with her daughter exposing her. She closed herself off to avoid the curious questions and judgment and the panic and guilt that she felt whenever anyone glimpsed at the small version of herself that was always strapped to her chest.

She preferred loneliness, she assured herself. She was always busy, and had no problem going off by herself to get work done or to have a break alone. But that was chosen and this was different. Being in the city made her feel like she had gotten carried away by the throngs of people off to a place and a mindset that she didn't like. She couldn't quite recognize herself because there were too many other people that, as a whole, had the capacity to overpower, wash her away, and cancelled out her identity.

She was not a student. She had somehow stepped into a role that she was unsure of because she still felt like a child herself. She was responsible, but that's because she had always been responsible. Her mother had her enrolled in a multiplicity of extracurricular activities to ensure that she was well rounded. She had taken ice-skating, violin, taekwondo, art club, and history team; and these were on top of weekly Mandarin classes that had left her with no capacity for speech in the language, traditional dance that had made her back sore, and monthly

meet ups with other adoptive families through Families with Children from China. Mia was always juggling these bits of identity that could never seem to cohere into one entity.

She warmed her hands with her order of tea, the steam curling up and hitting her face. She held the baby's hands in her own, admiring how they only filled the center of each palm. They had the same fingers, long, piano-worthy. Such a waste. Her mother had always said it was a shame that Mia did not know how to play. She blew at the steam, and she saw a glimpse of her face, tired, always tired, but strong.

It was time to call her parents. The phone rang so many times that Mia thought it would go to voicemail, but her father picked up.

“Hi, Dad?”

“Mia! It's good to hear from you, kiddo. We haven't heard from you in a while, but you know how your mother and I don't like to bother you when you're at school.”

“You can always bother me. I'm not busy.”

“You're always busy. How are you doing? It's noisy over there. Are you walking outside?” Mia gave the usual response that her roommate had friends over. Her father continued to ask the standard catch-up questions about her friends and her grades. Mia calculated that they were heading into the part of the semester where everyone would be preparing for finals.

“Good. Keep studying hard. Your mom and I are doing well. She's staying busy, tutoring the neighbor's kids. Carson's reading skills are slowly, slowly coming along. You were such a quick learner. We got so lucky.”

“Yeah, Dad, lucky.” Mia reversed the conversation to allow her dad to do the talking. She could just listen and not worry about where her story rang false.

“Don't forget to get some sleep and take a break once in a while.”

“I will. Thanks, Dad.”

The phone call did not make Mia feel any better. In fact, she felt guiltier about keeping this secret from her parents, for virtually messing up all of their lives, and then digging herself into a deeper hole. She just needed to focus on work and make some progress on the assignments. She never quite knew what Mr. E was getting at, or trying to get her to get at. It was all so convoluted, and she just wanted to understand the aim, the purpose of running around the city to spot something totally bizarre and move on to the next thing without solving what was beyond the surface.

School had taught her to analyze, to extract the deeper meaning, the greater “so what” that lurked beneath what was visible, but with Mr. E it seemed that there was nothing but a void. None of his clues pointed at any interconnection. It was like he just enjoyed sending her out to ridiculous places to further disconnect her from reality and destabilized her world a little bit with every task. Her curiosity was growing; it was not being quenched by finding out more with each assignment. She was just digging herself further in and investing too much time into his meaningless messages and clues.

Soon everyone would be going home or traveling to see relatives for the holidays, and she would be here. Probably. She would have to find a way to be here. She saw a man outside holding balloons, rushing into a taxi. A few of the balloons got caught in the door when he ducked inside. One, two, three, they flew away, unbound, drifting towards the empty sky. Mia thought that was kind of how life was. You snipped a few cords here and there, and soon enough, you were holding onto nothing.

She drew on brown napkins with an inky black pen that she had found in the baby bag. She scribbled mindlessly. Nothing she made anymore seemed to come out right. She had tried

copying some drawings, some masterworks at night when she couldn't sleep in the past days where she had not seen Mr. E.

Times Square continued to put her in a rut, all her energy and mental capacity for his mindless riddles drained. Nothing she created seemed right, like all the lines she drew were off center and insecure. Normally, she was an excellent copyist. Her ability to copy anything was what first sparked her interest in becoming an art conservationist. One teacher at school had thought she had photocopied a cartoon character that she had drawn with markers during recess. "You're like a little Xerox machine." So she had earned the name Xerox for about a week with requests from classmates to draw comic book characters and talking animals on TV. In her studies, she used this skill to replicate the original image so closely to repair whatever was missing. She could fill in the missing link flawlessly. But her hands had not been cooperating lately, or maybe it was her mind or her vision. Maybe she just needed to update her prescription. She was allowing herself to think too much these days, and it wasn't working. Nothing was working.

She looked back outside at the people passing. It was all so fleeting. Would there be anything for her to extract from this experience once it was over? What was the point of this job? Mr. E had given her her first paycheck—a sum of cash stashed into a sealed envelope along with a check he had voided. It was addressed to her in blocky letters, impersonal and unrevealing as anything else about him. He had not spoken of his or her progress in getting the Museum together. Every time Mia stopped by now, the items were exactly the same as before. No progress occurred inside that metal box. The objects continued to reflect themselves, unmoving, unchanging.

She wondered, though, if things were subtly and slowly shifting and transforming beneath her nose. She thought of it like the way that people cannot see themselves grow up day by day, overtime, ageing. It's the same everyday. You wake up and see the same dark hair and dark eyes in the mirror. You wake up and you see the same face. You wake up, and suddenly you're staring at someone else. You realize that you cannot be the same person that lived in the space of that eight-year-old who was way too excited about the first day of school, or that fourteen-year-old who thought she knew it all, or that seventeen-year-old who never really left the inhabited space.



THE WANDERING OF THE CHARACTERS SEEMS AIMLESS. THE PLOT HAS STRETCHED TO THE POINT OF THINNESS HERE, AS YOU ARE PAUSED IN YET ANOTHER COFFEE SHOP. YOU CAN PRACTICALLY SEE THROUGH THE PAGES. I CAN SEE YOU FLIPPING AT THE CORNERS TO SEE HOW MUCH LONGER UNTIL THIS CHAPTER ENDS, THE END OF THE LASSITUDE OF PLOWING THROUGH THE MEANINGLESSNESS. BUT THERE IS A POINT. THERE IS MEANING IN THE DAILY SLOG THAT IS BEING PERFORMED. SOON IT WILL BE OUT OF MY HANDS AND YOURS AS WELL. BUT FOR NOW, EMBRACE THE AMBIGUITY OF ONLY GLIMPING THE DAY TO DAY, THE SLOWNESS OF THIS SECTION. YOU MAY TAKE A BREAK NOW, IF YOU WISH, IF IT IS ALL BECOMING TOO MUCH OF NOTHING. OR YOU MAY PREFER TO CARRY ON WITH THE READING TO GET TO THE POINT.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF READING THIS ANYWAY? YOU FEEL THE WEIGHT OF THE BOOK IN YOUR HANDS. IT IS A BRICK FULL OF SHEETS, FULL OF THE LIFE OF ANOTHER. YOU LIVE VICARIOUSLY THROUGH THE JOURNEY. IT IS NOT YOUR OWN EXACTLY, YET YOU CHOOSE TO REMAIN. YOU LOOK ON THIS OTHER LIFE WITH MORE CLARITY, TRYING TO PIECE TOGETHER THE PIECES THAT CAN'T BE SEEN AS THEY ARE BEING LIVED. YOU CAN SEE, THOUGH, SINCE THESE

FLATTENED LIVES ARE FULL OF MEANING, FULL OF SYMBOLS THAT CAN BE CONNECTED. EVENTS ARE CAREFULLY FORESHADOWED. IT IS UP TO YOU, THE READER, TO LOOK FOR THE CLUES, TO SEARCH DEEPER. BUT CAN YOU LOOK DEEPER IF I'VE LEFT NOTHING UNDERNEATH THESE WORDS? THE BLANK OF THE PAGE TELLS THE PERFECT STORY THAT I HAVE RUINED WITH THESE IMPERFECT LINES.





Besides the paychecks, Mia had had no contact with Mr. E. She had not given him any paraphernalia for the new museum exhibition. She had not revealed much about her day either in her reports, though she suspected that he had other methods of observation that had gone undetected. She was paranoid. She shook her head to rid herself of the feeling, even though he had had friends and potential spies at a few of the locations. She was just worried all the time. She would deliver the scribbles on the napkin, probably not what Mr. E wanted, but it was still something. It was some record of her day. She had scrawled the time she had been sitting in the coffee shop on them, and she also had that ink drawing, dried, on the bathtub ledge.

“Took you a while. I was expecting you days ago. Did you get lost?”

Mia sighed through the phone. “This scavenger hunt system is not working out. If you just directly told me where to go, I could go get whatever you wanted and bring it back. Within reason,” she added, probably thinking that he would have her steal a woolly mammoth or a Picasso out of a museum or two.

“Mia, I explained this to you. It is in the contract. I do not care if you make it to the location, necessarily. I would like you to follow my clues. Even if you don’t succeed in bringing back items for the Museum, I am still interested in how you spent your time. I need it to log your hours, and I need to know in order so that I can acquire the Museum artifacts.”

“If you can get the objects for the Museum, then what am I doing?”

“You’re doing the research behind those objects because I don’t have time or access to the outside world when I’m writing. I’d still like to have all your notes. I can attain whatever I need in the end, but I need your observations for this experiment to be successful.”

“Experiment?”

“Er, the job of my research assistant.” He had never stuttered before. He had never stumbled through his carefully calculated plans. But Mia thought that the Times Square trip was a setup, and he had nothing fully fleshed out beyond choosing a point on a map. Mr. E had no idea what was supposed to happen as he wrote that clue. Perhaps he had been pressed for time, but maybe he had no greater intention with that one. Or maybe she just had not been clever enough to figure it out in a timely manner to receive a message or notice an absurdity that went beyond Time Square standards. “Fine, I’ll save both of our energy on the delivery of the next one. I need you to find out about a place for me. It grows and moves. It’s natural, where the train has stopped.”

“I’ll have to think about it.” She hung up the phone, straightened her daughter’s carrier, and went to sit and think. She leaned against the window of the Museum, absently looking inside to see if it had any answers for her.

As always, there was nothing inside to hint at Mr. E’s aims or his overall purpose. Mia started to head down the alleyway, figuring that a walk would jog her mind. She had scrawled

what Mr. E had said on the phone onto a notepad. A shock of red graffiti caught her eye as she began to leave: *QUESTION AUTHORITY?*

It undercut itself with the question mark. That was the point, though, wasn't it? Question who wrote the quote, question the quote itself. She did not have to obey a spray painted question on a dirty brick wall. But it did get her mind running. If she regarded Mr. E's tasks as brainteasers without consequences, she did not get so frustrated with him, believing there was a solution. But she never liked puzzles that she could not solve, things that did not entirely fit together.

She ended up walking on the High Line. Even though winter was nearing, there were still plants growing out of the old railroad track. It had been converted from a system of transportation to an eden between the buildings. Mia entered up the stairs that took her from the street up to the brick wall with vines spread across it. She had been here once in the summer, when the whole track was rich and lush, dense with leaves and people. Daffodils and hydrangeas had been in bloom.

Now, everything was the color of dull wheat. The vines on the wall had withered to thin, crumpled leaves, sucked of vitality until they were just shells that would soon turn to dust. The plants along the route overflowed onto the pathway of the elevated park. In the summer, the dropseed grasses had smelled like cilantro, but now they were dry and brittle. Mia still ran her fingers through them as she walked, enjoying the bristling beneath her fingertips. Though the plants were faded and wilted, spots of color came from the red berries that dotted the bare bushes; the bluish tint of the sky; and the roses in her daughter's cheeks from the chilly air. Darkness battled the daytime earlier, and it was night by four in the afternoon.

Nature was nearly synthetic in the city. It obeyed seasons, but it existed only within the confines of the urban landscape. It played its role as designated by the hands of humans. But of course, these roles could easily be reversed. Mia could see the Hudson River snaking along the opposite side of the High Line. Even if it flooded, the buildings would still be there, rising out of the water. Manhattan would become Atlantis.

The foundations would be destroyed, though. If nature took over, it would be unstoppable, stronger than any design plans and cultivation efforts. Nature did not care. It would not show deference to the delicate balance of man's architectural feats in his efforts to rise high up to the sky, to gain this birds eye view. Humans would be left to string the pieces together to reshape their work of artifice. Right now, though, this aboveground garden mixed with the buildings and the art, nature complying with design and aesthetic.

There were various sculptures along the track, but nothing that stuck out to Mia as a particularly Mr. E thing. She passed a few odd looking metal pieces that resembled a cross between long-legged humans and a showy species of bird with a twisted pipe fountain for a head. The High Line more largely presented itself as a piece of work that visitors could play on. At one end, the seating area dipped down so while people were sitting, they could see cars zipping right under their dangling legs on the street below. In the middle of the High Line, around 26th Street, there was a huge steel rectangle that served as a frame, placing the skyline in center view like you were looking at a photograph or a TV. Far in the distance, the Statue of Liberty waved her torch.

Mia did not sit down. It was getting too cold to just sit and think. Besides, she was determined to get back on track. She had been on a roll in her adjustment to the job at the beginning, and now she felt like she was slacking, but she would just have to push on.

She saw the fading sky on either side of her. It was starless. But the sky on her left shimmered like a mirage. She turned to look at it between the bare branches that loomed like brittle bones. It was a reflection, one of the art pieces that went incognito. “I hear there’s a real loony who lives in there,” a man who also might be a “real loony” said to Mia. She turned, nodded, and continued to stare at the mirror wall. Light seeped through the cracks. “It’s funny because he has windows. I think he’s a writer or something. Total recluse.” Mia turned to look at the man behind her. He was wearing a tinfoil hat and a misbuttoned flannel shirt beneath a dark green fleece. Earmuffs for a little girl clamped awkwardly onto his head.

“Have you met him?”

“No, but I’ve seen him. I’ve seen him.” His eyes got squinty. “He sometimes is in the window, right there, or his shadow is,” he said, pointing at the tiniest slit in the wall. “This used to be a normal apartment. I’ve been walking down this way before this park was even here. But the park went up, and suddenly the top floor of the building had mirror put over the brick. Probably for more peace and quiet or to mess with the tourists, or maybe the park demanded a piece of art from the guy if he’s an artist of any sort. This is what he came up with. It’s simple, but it messes with you, huh? It must be annoying to live on the High Line. Think of all the crazy weirdos that tramp along here everyday.”

Mia nodded. Was this a setup by Mr. E? He had had people approach her or her approach others on these little assignments, but this man seemed slightly unstable, not entirely mentally there. She wasn’t sure he would fit the bill for having enough required mental coherency in order to perform in one of Mr. E’s ploys. He was too much of a talker, and didn’t look like he could hold onto a piece of paper with a message on it to save his life.

“So he never leaves?” Mia asked.


“Never seen him exit or enter. I don’t even see him around a lot inside. He’s like that guy in Cooper Union. You know, the guy who lived in the cube for a year or whatever? That was mad. This man’s living in a glass house.”

Mia walked over to the plaque that spoke about the installation. The print was faded, the words practically gone. It just had the initials M.E. It was probably Mr. E, even though it was missing the R. But could he be living inside of it? Mia looked into the window that the man had pointed out. There was nothing visible in the window except for maybe a dark hallway, but someone must have been inside the house because the light was still coming through the cracks in the mirror.


“Sometimes I yell at whoever’s inside, but security always comes by and tells me to stop. Says I’m bothering the person who lives in that building and they can arrest me for being a public nuisance. I don’t even know what he does in there all the time. One day, I’ll catch him, though. I want to see if he’s real.”

“He’s real,” Mia said, a note of frustration in her voice as she continued to try to see inside the house. “I’ve never seen him either, but he exists. Otherwise what am I doing?” she muttered to herself. “Good luck.”

Mia had seen what she thought she was supposed to have seen, what others might have passed. She did not care that it was cold. She wrapped her scarf around her daughter’s face, bouncing her on her lap as she sat down on a bench. The window was too high for her to directly see inside from her seated position, but she waited for the light to turn on, for some sort of sign from the author.



WAITING IS AN UNDERWHELMING TASK. IT DOES NOT MATTER THAT THIS COULD BE THE MOMENT FOR A COLLISION. IT DOES NOT MATTER WHAT THE SIGNS POINT AT OR WHAT CAN BE SEEN. WHATEVER YOU THINK IS AT THE END OF YOUR WAIT IS UNATTAINABLE. THE ONLY THING TO REFLECT ON IS YOURSELF AS YOU LOOK INTO THE WALL THAT IS TOO HIGH TO SEE BEYOND. IT SHOWS YOU PIECES OF THE SKY. THE CLOUDS. THAT IS ALL THAT IS THERE FOR YOU TO GRASP.



It was too cold to wait. She stood up and paced back and forth on the High Line. “Excuse me,” she said as she snuck past a clump of people just to turn back around and walk back towards the house. The High Line was clearing out now that that the sun had almost set completely and it was cold out, but there were still late night walkers and groups of friends still hanging out. Mia bounced on the balls of her feet and rubbed her hands together to try to regain feeling. Evenings were too cold to be waiting for an invisible man at the risk of her daughter’s health and her own sanity.

Mr. E wasn’t coming. He was not going to appear in the window or introduce himself. He wasn’t even going to show up to laugh at her like everything was an elaborate joke. He could have easily laughed and that would signify that the last few months of her life had not been real. They were just a setup, which everyone could then acknowledge, and then Mia could be restored to her place in her old life again. No one was inside the reflective house, though. The crazy man who had spoken to her had been exactly that—crazy.

She looked out over the plants that lined the railing. The city unfurled around her. An unlit taxi passed below. A few business people in suits ambled down the cobblestone streets. A

woman walked her dog. A clock tower chimed. None of them directly interacted, but Mia continued to watch as they wove between each other, a nearly imperceptible wavering in the atmosphere. But Mia saw it like in the gallery's last room. It was a Rube Goldberg Machine. Everything had been set into motion, and here she was, playing her part in the mechanism of daily life. She was merely a cog, a pawn, in the machine. She filled her role as expected.

Or was she the indicator between two paths to vastly different results? The machine could spiral down a series of reactions. The results would change depending on her sway and how she acted. That was too much responsibility for a cog. Who was actually running the whole mechanism anyway?

Mia saw the irony in her attempt to get off the grid, in that she had moved to the most iconic gridded city. She stayed off the subway and walked across the island to go home, out of the cold evening air and away from the invisible house with the absent author. She walked on the uneven ground until she was back on the solid surface of the narrow sidewalks, stomping along until she returned to the Village.

Mia was annoyed. She had missed something she was not supposed to have missed. Maybe she had not waited there long enough, or maybe he had emerged to peek through the window and she had missed it while pacing along. She felt the same way about his last clue. Maybe she had blinked and missed the blatantly obvious sign that would lead her the right way. She fed her daughter when they had gotten back to the apartment, holding her close, trying to think of what all of it meant, what had escaped her, whether she was missing something right in front of her because she was overthinking things, as usual.

“I picked these for you.” She stuffed some long, dry blades of the wheat-like plant through the hole in the wall. She was not supposed to have picked them, but she was doing all sorts of things she probably should not have been doing. “Where were you last night?” Mia asked on the phone, wondering if she could even ask him these kinds of questions. “You weren’t home.” Her face heated up.

“That is true.” He ignored her first question and instead just acknowledged that he had not been home.

“You said you never leave your house.”

“I don’t.”

Mia frowned at the phone, at his response, as cryptic as ever, even when he was just having a normal conversation and not sending her off to some random part of the city. He probably didn’t even live in that building.

“But you did meet my friend, Ray? Maybe friend is a bit much. He’s more of a conspiracy theorist. He has never read anything I’ve written, to my knowledge, but he is intrigued by how the world is put together. Patterns and maps.”

Mia noted the admittance that he did live there. She had found out something about him. “So he was supposed to lead me to the next place?”

“What do you mean? You are leading yourself.” He hung up the phone.

She knocked her forehead against the thick glass of the Museum. “There is no point to this. I should just get a real job with consistent hours and straightforward responsibilities,” Mia said to her daughter, her face close to the back of her head, lips by her ear. But those were the problems—the consistent hours and responsibilities made a conventional job impossible. This job allowed her the flexibility that she needed. The rigidity that she wanted was no longer good

for her. She was learning how to change and to adapt. Plus job hunting made Mia angrier than anything, upset with herself.

Those two years plus of school were an obstacle blocking her possibilities. A piece of paper with some squiggles on it that claimed she was qualified, or at least had devoted a few years of her life to books about those subjects, was holding her back. She did not want to give up on that yet, but she had an anchor around her chest that needed real and tangible things now. So Mia would have to push aside her loftier wants and deal with the weight of the present. She breathed deeply to steady herself outside of the Museum. The light inside had grown dimmer, and Mia wondered what would happen when it went out, since Mr. E did not appear to be renovating any time soon.

There was an address on a slip of paper, right in her line of sight, inside of the Museum. She wondered if Mr. E had been shuffling things around, microscopic shifts so it did not look like any change was occurring. Maybe he was moving things around beneath the most obvious top layer, great seismic shifts occurring right under her nose, right under what was visible to visitors. Maybe he had placed the note right on top of a stack of books, plainly evident because he wanted her to go there next. He had heard her frustration for the past couple of visits, and maybe he really was going to give her a break. She copied it down carefully, a wave of relief and determination passing through her as she promised herself that she would be better. She would be more careful in her inspections and observations. She would keep her eyes open to see what was ready to be taken, for all the right signs.



The address had taken her to Canal Street. She had been avoiding this place ever since she had arrived. Chicago Chinatown was one thing, but this was a different type of beast—one made up of aggressive peddlers selling knock-off designer brands; storefronts displaying strings of fake jewels; and hoards of tourists clumped together, mesmerized by the garish wares. She had gotten off at the wrong stop on the A train and ended up having to walk several more blocks downwards.

On her way, she was stopped twice and asked for directions. She did not know if it was because she appeared Chinese or if it was because everyone down this way was heading towards Chinatown. She was stopped again on her way when someone called out, “ni hao” at her. She rolled her eyes and continued at a fast clip towards her destination. The person tried again, persistent about speaking to her in Mandarin, even though Mia had quit Mandarin lessons as soon as she possibly could. She was American.

She had been six months old when her parents had brought her home. They made sure she was immersed in her heritage all through elementary and middle school, but as soon as high

school started, she had stopped Chinese dance and Chinese language. She had no patience for the language especially. There were too many tones for her ear to grasp, and she would rather pass notes with her friends instead of recite poems about beansprouts from memory. Plus there was no alphabet, just little pictographic symbols that never managed to stick in her head. She could draw some of them, but her teacher usually made her rewrite full pages of single characters because she had not drawn the strokes in the right order. If there was one class that Mia absolutely detested, it was that one.

There were times when Mia felt the tugging obligation to learn Mandarin, but every time someone made a persistent effort to speak to her in Chinese while she was minding her own business, she grew defensive. They would not normally say hi to her in English, so why did they see her walking along or sitting alone in a park and think that she would want to speak to them in another language? Her features were always giving her away. Her mother did not understand Mia's irritation, though. She thought that it was fine that people did this to Mia, that they were simply interested in her heritage.

Mia had put up with it all through elementary and middle school, having to listen to the constant taunting *ni haos* and *konichiwas* when she was out on the playground or eating her lunch. It bothered her even more that they sometimes could not even get her background straight, unable to differentiate that she was Chinese and not Japanese. She also had dealt with her fair share of mindless gibbering by kids pretending to speak Chinese. "Mom, I'm American. I'm just from here. I'm not *really* Chinese," she had tried explaining after complaining about one of these incidents when she was in seventh grade.

"Of course you are Chinese."

“But not completely. I’m like twenty percent Chinese, and it’s mostly in the outer layer. I’m not straight from China. You’re not straight from China either, so I don’t have any Chinese habits. I can barely use chopsticks. If someone is being racist, I can be offended; if I’m in a room of Chinese people, I’m basically just white.”

Her mother didn’t get it. Her father insisted that he didn’t see her as Chinese. And that probably just meant that she was not foreign to him. She wore the outward appearance, but inside, she was just Mia. Her parents had done what they thought was right by putting her into classes that would hopefully make her closer to her background. Mia could not resent them for that, even though she had hated all of those classes while she was growing up. She had not yet reconciled any sort of adherence or great attachment to her assigned culture. So what would she teach her daughter? She was too far removed from her birthplace.

“Ni hao!” the voice called again. It came from a man in a jogging suit.

Mia turned down the next corner just to get away. He ran to catch up with her. She turned to glare at him.

“Thanks,” he said in a tone that implied “for nothing” as he passed her. She shouldn’t have to explain that she didn’t speak Chinese. It wasn’t a thing that should be assumed. She didn’t go up to random strangers on the street who she thought might speak French or German and pester them to talk to her in those languages.

Mia continued to follow the address to a grocery store. It smelled overwhelmingly of a fish market mixed with spices. It was full of odd treats and ingredients that reminded her of all those trips to Chinatown throughout childhood and Mandarin lessons when the teacher would bring in snacks to bribe her and her friends to focus. It rarely worked, but Mia remembered the salty shrimp chips, slippery cubes of lychee jellies, and packets of seaweed.

The visceral response of memory overrode her feeling of displacement as she looked at the bold Chinese characters that she could not read. The aisles were bursting with crinkled packages printed with cute cartoons of chubby pigs and sheep. She walked slowly down each aisle, feeling too self-conscious to zigzag around the store. She would walk up the aisle towards the front of the store and then retreat to the back so she did not have to face the eyes of the cashier yet. There were square bundles of dry soup on the shelves and seasoning for dumplings.

There were stacks of those red bowls that had been so familiar in her house when she was younger, full of wonton soup and cracks filled with hot glue from when she had practiced the Mongolian Bowl Dance. That was a decade ago. Each chip and fracture in the bowls resulted in reprimands from her dance teacher. Balancing three stacked bowls in a little hat tied to her head and spinning them around in her hands would be challenging for any ten-year-old. She had dropped them so many times.

There was nothing in the aisles. Or rather, there was so much in the aisles, overwhelming her senses with scents and colors and incomprehensible words, along with childhood memories that flowed through her mind as she skimmed her fingers across the food items. She was transported back in time to when she was little and enthusiastic about learning calligraphy and making rice balls at cultural camp.

She regained focus quickly while looking for where Mr. E might have placed a tiny note. There did not seem to be any room within those crowded shelves. She wondered if he had even bothered. She began to think that Mr. E had only set up the first assignments with elaborate schemes and plans through his seemingly random list of connections to convince Mia that she was being sent on purposeful missions without him having to leave his room. But now, he was not answering her; he was not clarifying anything, and she did not know how to succeed at her

job. How could she fulfill the tasks without any clear objectives? He had told her it was not necessarily about the retrieval of a message as the ultimate goal. But if not that, then what? If there were no indicators that informed her how to advance, how was she supposed to continue, unassisted as an assistant?

She tried to buy a bun for lunch and a bag of white rabbit candies. The cashier first spoke to her in Chinese, which Mia only could respond to with a blank stare and a helpless, apologetic shrug. She pointed at the bun she wanted. Fortunately, the cashier switched over to broken English. There were only a few times when Chinese people had tried speaking to her, and they were always in desperate situations. An old man on an international flight had landed in O'Hare at the same time Mia had arrived home from school a few semesters ago. His bags were lost and he didn't know where to find his ride, but Mia could only apologetically shake her head in confusion.

"Are you from Suzhou?" the woman asked.

Mia nodded, amazed that someone could so easily pinpoint exactly where she had been born. Her features were always exposing her. Her thick black hair and angular eyes with their heavy lids had frequently been commented on throughout elementary school.

Her last name, on the other hand, helped in obscuring her identity. She laughed when one kid in her freshman philosophy class said that he could tell which country the Asian students were from by their last names. Her last name had stumped him. She called her dad on the phone after class and told him, "good job having a Scottish last name."

"That is the province that I am from, too. I have been here now for thirteen years, but I want to go back after my son becomes a doctor."

Mia nodded again. Her parents had fortunately not pressured her to go into the medical field or law for that matter. She was free to happily coast on her museum dreams. "I've never been back, but I was born there. Maybe one day I'll take her," she said, nodding at her daughter. She had surprised herself.

The woman smiled a full smile and Mia left with her bag of treats and thoughts about her responsibilities to her daughter.

She still did not know what had Mr. E meant by sending her down to Chinatown, or if he had even really meant it. She had just made a guess based on an address scribbled onto a piece of paper that she had spotted through a window. Outside, she dumped her change and receipt into her plastic bag. She wandered down to a bench to sit for a moment and eat her lunch.

It was a cloudy day, but the sun was desperately trying to peek through. Mia closed her eyes, trying to feel the sun through her skin, but instead she felt a gust of wind. There were a few kids playing basketball behind her. She kept her gaze down as she chewed, staring at the shoes of the passerbys. She had stopped looking at peoples' faces because they either had a smile for her daughter and a word of advice for her or a look of concern.

"I'm sorry that this is how it is right now," Mia spoke to her daughter as she finished up. Her daughter looked straight ahead at the cars. Mia would just have to talk to her parents and tell them everything she had been hiding for the last year. But would that solve anything? They would help, she was certain, but the dynamic will have shifted even more than it already had since she had left for college and her parents had become empty nesters. They had stopped worrying about her so much. Their lives had picked up a different rhythm that wasn't based around picking her up late from school on Art Club meeting days and driving her to violin lessons after dinner.

She could not come back home so soon with another baby for them to raise when they had just gotten one out of the house. Besides, her parents were older. That's why they had chosen to adopt her. She had gotten a child too early and her parents had gotten one late. "I know I'm not doing this right. You barely even have an identity and I'm going to be anonymous for as long as I need to be in this city. You need a real name and a real home with functional parents and an actual crib. You need to know where you came from, and I need to get to where I'm going." She kissed her head. She would be three months old in a few days, and she still had no name.

"You know what?" Mia said as she stood up. She did not wait for an answer. "I'm going to take a break from this. Just for a little bit. I don't know if this is good for us right now. We'll still do this, but we have to slow down. I'm going to use the time to do some studying. And we're not going to worry so much." They zipped back uptown on the train.

Mia did not return to the Museum the next morning, even after she had gathered up candy wrappers and wrote up a list of things she had seen in the grocery store, her dialog with the cashier, and a rock that she had picked up on the sidewalk. It was a jagged dark green stone. She had also bought Mr. E a small red bowl with her allotted excursion money and a tiny happy Buddha, slipped inside of a Chinese New Year lucky red envelope.



WHAT'S IN A NAME? IT IS A SERIES OF SOUNDS THAT BECOMES FAMILIAR TO US AND EQUIVALENT TO THE SINGULAR LETTER 'T'. IT IS JUST A BUNCH OF LETTERS THAT CARRY THE WEIGHT OF A BELOVED FAMILY MEMBER OR DEAR FRIEND, HOLDING THE YOUNGEST PERSON WITH THE NAME UP TO THE STANDARDS OF ALL OF THOSE THAT BORE THE WEIGHT OF THE NAME PREVIOUSLY. MAYBE YOU'RE WAITING FOR SOME INDICATION OF PERSONALITY TO APPEAR BEFORE

BEARING SOMEONE DOWN WITH THIS LABEL. BABIES CHANGE AT AN ACCELERATED SPEED, FASTER THAN THE PAGES SLIDE THROUGH YOUR FINGERS AND THE NUMBERS COUNT DOWN YOUR TIME SPENT INSIDE THIS STORY. CONSTANT CHANGES ARE ALWAYS TICKING THROUGH OUR MINDS UNTIL WE REACH WHATEVER CONCLUSIONS WE WANT TO REACH, WHATEVER CAN BE DRAWN FORTH AND GATHERED INTO A NICE BUNDLE THAT FORMS A SINGULAR POINT OF VIEW.

MAYBE YOU ARE GETTING FED UP WITH ALL THIS CAT AND MOUSE PLAY, WITH THE UNSOLVED PUZZLES IN THESE PAGES, BUT WHAT IF THERE REALLY IS NOTHING TO SEE? MAYBE THE CONTRIVED NATURE OF THIS STORY IS GETTING TO YOU, AS YOU SEE THAT THE AUTHOR IS FALLIBLE AND THINGS HAVE FALLEN THROUGH. I THOUGHT I COULD HELP YOU, MAYBE EVEN SAVE YOU. BUT YOU HAVE NOT BEEN YIELDING OR MAKING THINGS ACCESSIBLE TO ME. MAYBE IT'S ALL UP TO YOU. IDEAS HAVE WOBbled OUT OF CONTROL UNTIL THEY HAVE FALLEN OFF THE PAGE, LOST IN MEANING, LOST IN INTENTION. IF YOU CAN'T FIGURE IT OUT, HOLDING THIS BOOK IN YOUR HANDS AND LOOKING AT IT LIKE A MAP, HOW ARE YOU SUPPOSED TO BE ABLE TO TELL IF YOUR EXISTENCE IS ONLY MADE UP FROM THE ACCUMULATION OF KEYSTROKES? THE STRAIGHT AND HARSH BLACK AND WHITE IS BARELY BREATHABLE FOR GROWTH. IT'S A CONCRETE TEXT.

THERE IS A BREAK IN THE PLAN WHEN THE AUTHOR DOES NOT GET WHAT HE WANTS. THE LINE ON THE MAP HAS SPATTERED OUT LIKE THE LIFELINE ON A PALM WHEN IT FEATHERS INTO CREASES. THERE IS NO X MARKS THE SPOT WHEN THE CHARACTERS DECIDE TO USE THEIR OWN MINDS TO MAKE CHOICES THAT ARE BEYOND THE CONTROL AND CONFINES OF THE PLOT. PLANS AND NOTES GRIND TO A HALT AND THE AUTHOR IS LEFT THERE, BLOCKED OUT. HE IS FORCED TO EITHER SIT AND TYPE OUT WHAT IS HAPPENING LIKE HE IS POSSESSED BY THE PEOPLE TAP DANCING IN HIS MIND, PULLING THE LEVERS INSTEAD OF THE OTHER WAY AROUND. THE PUPPETS HAVE TAKEN OVER BY ENTANGLING HIM IN THEIR MILLIONS OF STRINGS, TWISTED PLOT LINES, STRANGLING HIM UNTIL HE IS TETHERED TO THEM SO COMPLETELY AND HAS TO MOVE HIS FINGERS

TO KEEP UP WITH THEIR ADVENTURES AND WHAT IS HAPPENING IN THEIR MINDS AS THEY RUN ALL OVER HIM. HIS JOB IS SIMPLY TO GRASP THE WORDS QUICKLY ENOUGH.

OR THEY ESCAPE HIM, EVADE HIM, AND THERE IS NOTHING LEFT. HE CAN NO LONGER SEE INTO THE WINDOW OF THEIR LIVES. THE CURTAIN HAS CLOSED, OBSCURING THE VIEW SO HE MUST MAKE SLOPPY GUESSWORK AND INFERENCES BASED ON THE LAST THING HE HEARD. HE DOES NOT KNOW WHEN THE WINDOW WILL OPEN, WHEN SOMEONE WILL BE ON THE OTHER END OF THE LINE AGAIN. WILL YOU PICK UP THE BOOK? PICK UP THE PHONE?



“Mia, where have you been?” He rarely called her cellphone. She was usually the one to come to him. A week and a half had passed since Mia had walked through that grocery store. She had not wanted to turn in her folder of observations yet. How was she supposed to investigate and try to see the bigger picture if she was giving away the information as soon as she had obtained it? She had tried taking pictures, but they were soon forgotten in cyberspace. She liked the tangible weight of the folder hidden away in her drawer, brimming with papers she had written and doodled all over, as if she had taken her jumbled mind and dumped it on the surface. But it only caught the trickle of the splatter that resulted. The bulk was still caught up in Mia’s mind. But she did not know how to get rid of it yet. The folder in the drawer was like a heart in the floorboard, always there behind a thin layer of wood and much more pressing than a jumble of pixels.

“I’ve been around. I just needed to get some things in order.” Mia’s voice did not waver. She rarely did.

“I’ve been trying to make it easier for you, but you seem to have disappeared completely. You’ve been unresponsive and neglectful.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” But she did not want to apologize. “I don’t have anything for you right now. I don’t know when I will again.” She wondered if she sounded flaky, which she had never been. But he was, so it all evened out, right?

“You signed our contract, though, and you agreed to work out these clues until the Museum is able to be renovated with fresh ideas.”

“I know the terms of the contract. I just have other more pressing matters in my life at the moment.” Her voice had an edge.

“Take some time, then. I’ll be waiting for you when you’re ready to return, though the Museum does need to be updated soon.” He softened—how strange, how compassionately human—though his voice was still firm and commanding, like he thought he controlled her whims and actions.



Mia returned to her small room. She began to plan everything out neatly, just to see if she could find any patterns, any indications for how she should proceed. Her endless lists turned out to be useless in wrangling things back to order. She had taped papers all over her walls. It was like studying for chemistry finals again.

When Mia was not making desperate lists, she was painting and telling stories to her daughter. Those were the parts of her day that made the most sense, the parts that she most enjoyed. The shorter days made Mia feel like sleeping through most of them, but her daughter made sure she woke up, fed her, and took her for a walk. She was growing more aware as time passed, and she passed out of her nebulous state as a newborn into the consciousness of a small human with her own reactions and thoughts as she grew into her own identity.

At the end of the day, Mia appreciated the quiet of the night, the calm blanket that fell over the city—at least from Monday through Wednesday, anyway. There was a man who stood on the corner and shouted streams of words every Thursday beginning at eight o'clock at night. His words were endless and loud, but incomprehensible through the brick walls of the apartment.

She made out “Once upon a time” on several nights, and she wondered if he was having an enforced, unwanted story time for all of New York to hear. All of New York, except for her. It frustrated Mia to be able to hear the sounds but not understand, only catching an impression of a word every so often. Maybe this is what her daughter was experiencing—the ability to hear but not listen in her incomprehension of going from moonbeam to human as she adapted to earthly life. Or maybe it was more similar to learning a foreign language with cotton stuffed in your ears.

Mia had had to strain to understand French and German in her language classes without having cotton in her ears, and lately English was starting to taste funny, too. Words were slipping from her mind, tasting of soap or syrup instead of their usual feeling. Mia worried that her brain was slowly turning to mush from being out of practice, out of school, away from other people to talk to, and due to sleep deprivation. It had happened in high school, too, where she would replace words with others in her sleepy state. Senior year had been hard. She had worked so hard. Cucumbers would turn into computers and pants would turn into palms.

She tried to gear her brain up to speed each morning, leafing through at least five pages of notes in each subject that she had taken in the last year. She would review old painting identifications for art. She would sing the periodic table of elements to keep her mind sharp and for her daughter to hear. Mia hoped that telling her daughter about the lives of artists and scientists—constructing stories from her lined pages of notes—along with her own stories, the words would start tasting normal again.

Mia had put a temporary halt to copying other artworks. They were coming out like her words. Something about the nose would be off, or the water would be the wrong texture, too rough most of the time. The dry ridges of paint would glue Mia’s fingernails to her skin. Studio

art was admittedly Mia's weakest subject in her trio of studies. Chemistry and art history were memorization and then putting those patterns into practice. In chemistry, she saw firsthand what was happening in labs. In art history, she traced small details into the larger sweeping categories of movements. But studio art challenged her when she had to break away from copying.

She was never loose enough or full of enough ideas to let her drawings go. She was an outliner. When she had access to grid paper and a ruler, she would use them to get perfect lines and angles. Her instructor had taken those away from her one class just to see what would happen, and Mia could only draw a few stiff lines of the still life in front of her. Life drawing practically killed her because it was looser and messier. She had never felt like she was able to capture the essence of the person modeling, like some of her classmates could do with a few strokes of a pencil. She clutched her pencil too tightly, spent too much time caught up in the small details instead of a larger gesture. She needed the guidelines of a master, so all she had to do was add in the small things that had faded due to time and the elements to right it again. She was used to working from photographs, not reality.

Now she had time to work on it, though. She worked on self-portraits by looking at her reflection in the window once it grew dark outside. She had not drawn an honest picture yet. She had started to avoid looking at herself in mirrors in the city, but then Mr. E had made her face herself in those mirrored rooms in the exhibitions, in the books that she chose at the Strand, in her groceries that she put in her basket. But those glimpses were only big enough to show an eye or the worried edge of her mouth. Here, the window was big enough to give her a full picture of her face. She still looked the same as she did when she was in middle school, but now her head was full of different things.

When she was tired of herself, she drew her daughter, which she realized was actually discomfoting because she still felt like she was drawing herself, or rather a past version of herself. She traced her forehead with a thick dark pencil, feathering in the hair, twirling in the fingers. She was still holding too tightly and it was coming out wrong, not breathable, as her teacher would say. She would start over. Or she would leave the sketch barely visible on the surface and go in with paint to try to breath into it. Sometimes it would work, and she would feel like she could move back to copying, but sometimes it would come out terribly and Mia would feel bad about the waste of paint.

As she drew, she told stories from either her desk or the kitchen table. She had allowed herself to move from her bedroom into the kitchen because she needed more space. She placed her daughter on a blanket on the floor and either sat down there with her or with all of her supplies and paper stretched across the table. She did not start her stories with *Once upon a time* because they would have required the *happily ever after, the end*, which she did not have, which no one really had, anyway. She dove right into the stories that made up her life, talking about her childhood, her parents, their stories, her favorite stories when she was little, but made up with new characters and endings.

“One of my favorite books was about drinking the ocean—or was it the sea? Maybe it was about drinking up the whole sea.”

Her daughter was an excellent listener, silent and attentive. If she grew tired, she would drift off. She never cried when her mother was telling her a story. It was like she was trying to absorb everything Mia was orally collaging together so she would have the knowledge once she was actually presented with these characters that were her family members.

“We’ll just have a nice Thanksgiving here. Usually my mom makes a huge turkey and we have some of the neighbors over. We never cook turkey, but we do for Thanksgiving because it’s what you do. It’s always dry. But we’re going to do things differently.” Mia had slipped out of Thanksgiving easily. She never went home anyway for Thanksgiving because she was usually too busy with getting things in order for the final half of the semester and could use the two extra days off. She sometimes would go home with a roommate or a friend on Thursday for Thanksgiving dinner and be back on campus by morning or that night if she could help it.

This was around the time last year that she had grown slightly concerned, when she began to feel just the slightest bit off. Mia never got sick. She was too determined to do something as careless as get sick. She did not like resting. She was no good at staying still. She attributed it to stress and the anxiety and when she had to deal with messy things like feelings. She was an internal person and seeing something external that was very much her—and something else—made her feel something that was indescribably good and bad, but mostly just disbelief.

She had never been one of those little girls who fantasized about weddings and babies. She was more interested in drawing and reading books than dressing up. She thought that puffy dresses made people look like waltzing cakes. They descended like clouds on her reality, too light to exist in the same atmosphere. She was too dense and would drop right out of that cloud and land with her feet back on the ground in an instant.

But when she was drawing her daughter and herself late, late into the night, she sometimes fell into these hallucinations where she could see her daughter as herself. It was a vision that surpassed what she figured was the normal amount of fantasizing about her daughter’s future. She usually would not allow it because she could not picture her daughter

growing up in this very temporary apartment. She thought she saw a familiar little girl with dark hair and shining eyes that always seemed to smile. Her pencil stroke lines were the same for her and for her daughter when she drew their eyes, their nose, their mouth. Her daughter was just in miniature. She saw the girl spinning around the kitchen when she took her eyes off of her paper and lifted her head to look over at her daughter.

Somewhere between the two points, this little girl appeared, varying in age the harder Mia looked. Sometimes she was a toddler, scooting across the dark wood floor; sometimes she was about ten years old, sock sliding around; and one time, she was a teenager—too close to Mia’s age for comfort and too different from Mia to be some ghostly version of her. Her attitude was different. The way she carried herself was lighter. But Mia realized that she had been like that in high school, stressed but sure that she carried the world in her palm. She would have the power to unclench her fists and charge the world with such a shock when she was ready.

The teenager, though, was definitely too messy to be Mia, her hair curling up around her face where Mia’s behaved. She had on a sweater that drowned her, which was something that Mia would never wear. That vision only lasted for a few seconds, but Mia immediately tried to get it down on paper. Her fingers clumsily tried to capture that girl again, feeling her own cheek as she traced it on the paper, making a rougher version of herself.

“Was that you? Are you going to turn into that?” she asked her baby. Mia could barely imagine that the little pudgy ball on the ground could turn into that. The baby put her foot in her mouth. “I’m going insane. Let’s go to sleep.”

But Mia could not sleep. Thanks to her late nights of drawing and painting, she had become wired for working late into the night and off her usual schedule. She lay in the small bed, on her back, looking at the empty ceiling and imagining stars—real or glow ones. She would

love to see the open sky instead of plaster, the millions of twinkling stars that would lower themselves from the open sky just to tuck her in. Not here, though. Here they were imperceptible.



Their room was getting too crowded with sketches that were partially painted, draped over the bedframe and the opened drawers to dry. Something had been bothering Mia since her last assignment. She had not been able to get Mr. E and where he lived out of her mind since that encounter on the High Line.

So the pair walked across the city to get back to the invisible house after a sleepy day of sketching and staring out the window. She walked across nine avenues, her pace increasing to the point where she felt an ache in her shins. The urgency she felt, the desperation for her to see that Mr. E was living and dictating her life would prove to her that everything was in order and not just happening inside her head. She was sure he was there. She would see him, introduce herself in person, just meet the enigma. She would give him his missing files and paperwork and talk to him. She would find out what plans he had for the Museum and what he was writing. She would talk to him face-to-face and find out what his intentions were so that she could clarify her role in all of this and how her research was going to manifest itself to achieve whatever goal. She felt like he was there, unsuspecting at his kitchen table. He had become unaware of her

whereabouts since she had temporarily stopped engaging with his games. That didn't mean that the riddles had stopped lingering in her mind, though.

It was getting dark again, too early, so Mia ran up the stairs, skipping steps at a time to hurtle herself forward and past the stream of people leaving the elevated garden. There was a cluster of people around the invisible house. Maybe they were watching Mr. E at his table inside. Maybe there was a note in the window, some puzzle for her that the crowd had read and had grown perplexed by. Maybe they were trying to solve it at this very moment. As a group, they could collaborate so much faster, making Mia worry that she would be replaced and soon. Mr. E had all of Manhattan playing into his puzzle, brought right to his doorstep. She would just have to think harder, faster, react and figure out the true message. Or maybe not get to the end faster, but do a better job of looking along the way. Mr. E had told her repeatedly that the goal was not to solve the riddle, but instead what really mattered was the act of solving. Mia rushed forward.

“Magnus, Magnus. Who are you? Who? Are? You?” Crazy Ray was dancing under the window, drawing out words. He was having an outburst, looking into Mr. E's window with binoculars. He waved flashlights in the dark window. The glass was not glowing like last time. He stopped howling and dancing, and bent down to grab an armful of objects that were strewn across the High Line path like offerings to the author. Ray started juggling the objects he had collected.

“Mama, there's nothing there. Why is he doing that?” a little boy asked his mother.

“It's art,” she responded, taking a picture with her phone. Mia did not think this was art. She shielded her own daughter away, holding her close and turning sideways so she had some distance from Ray and his juggling.

“I know you’re in there. I know it. I’ll blow your house down. Come out. Come out to play, Magnus.” Ray had been lucid the first time Mia had seen him, and he had already been disturbing in that state. Now it was like all of his marbles had not only escaped the bag but also rolled down the street and into the sewer grate.

He was tossing key chains and paperbacks and hats and eyeglasses and skeleton keys into the air, sending them into sailing arcs in front of the window. Each object seemed suspended in space before landing in Ray’s other hand. The pages of the books flapped loudly like dying birds. “You’re not being fair. Your buildings are crooked. They’re going to fall apart and make a mess, and you don’t even care.” Mia did not know what he was ranting about or the gibberish that he had begun to spout. He was spewing a word that sounded like “invisible.” The building was fine and did not look like it was going to fall apart, as far as Mia could tell. Then Ray chucked a book at the mirror. Good thing they were paperback. Mia felt like she should stop Ray before security came and took him away.

“Ray.”

“You can’t just set things up wrong and let them go. We are not wind up toys. Life is not a game to be played with.” He had started hurling picture frames at the dark window. They went off course, some hitting the mirror, some dropping off the elevated park.

“Ray. You have to stop. He’s not home.”

“He is home!”

“Where did you get this?” Mia scooped up a small eroded statue from where it had landed in a shrub.

“I found it. And all that other stuff.” He had run out of things to throw and he was calming down. The crowd was dispersing, Mia noticed with relief.

“Where did you find it?”

“I don’t know. It just appeared over here one day. Sometimes I go and collect things I find on the street. I walk the High Line everyday, and one day, I just found this book on the railroad track and I found the key chains hanging from trees. The glasses were from all over. I think he’s leaving them for me, messing with me. What can I do with these things? And the books are useless. Totally useless. They mess with your head. They’d be better off as bricks.”

Mia nodded. Mr. E had been throwing out the things in the Museum while she was gone. She began flipping through the paperback book that had the same shade of green covers as the one on nightstand back at the apartment.

“Don’t read it. Tape it shut and throw it in the river. Drown it. Burn it. Throw it out. It’s a waste of paper and brain space. It’s like a disease. You start it and then it seals the bridges up there until it has taken over your life. You find out things you didn’t want to know. Just get rid of it.”

She dropped it on the ground. Mia thought about how Mr. E’s assignments had filled her with that sentiment, but to a much lesser extent. She had not totally lost it like Ray. He continued mumbling that word that sounded like “invisible” over and over again. It sounded vaguely Latin or maybe French, but Mia couldn’t be sure because of the way Ray had been slurring his words. A High Line caretaker in a green jacket was walking at a quick pace towards them. Mia tried to get Ray to leave as quickly as possible.

“Take care of yourself, Ray.” She realized she had repeated the words that he had told her when she had first encountered him weeks ago. He walked away, descending back to street level as soon as he saw the man in the khaki pants and windbreaker emblazoned with the High Line’s railroad track logo. Mia was unsettled by her run-in with Ray in his state of mind. It was

alarming to be so close to someone who smelled of crazed, fermented thoughts and pure feeling that overcame his words as he made those unintelligible noises—eel-lee-si-bul.

But her curiosity got the best of her, once again, and compelled her to pick up the book as soon as Ray had gone and take it back to the apartment. The light was still off in the invisible house, but Mia could have sworn she heard a ticking noise like a clock winding time backwards or fingers scuttling across keys. She shook her head and left, taking her time getting back to the apartment by breathing in the foggy cold air and trying to steady herself. When she wasn't running around for Mr. E, she was running away, and that meant she still was doing the former.

“Have you booked your plane ticket home for winter break yet?”

“I'm working on it. I've just been really busy.”

“Oh, were you sleeping? It's half past one, Mia. Don't you have class today?”

“No, Mom. I don't have class on Tuesdays. I've been staying up late to finish homework. Art classes take a lot out of me.”

“I know. You work so hard. Make sure you're getting enough to eat. I don't normally open your mail, Mia, but there was a bank statement the other day that had a second notice stamp on it, so I opened it. You're late on paying your bills. Do you need me to put some extra money into your account this month? It said you've been making purchases at grocery stores in New York City? What were you in the city for?”

“It was a school trip.” Mia was relieved that her mother could not see her face. Her ears were turning bright red with the lie. “We went to the Met for a weekend for my gothic architecture class. I just bought some snacks for the ride back.”

“Oh, how was it? You should’ve let us know you were going. We barely hear from you anymore.”

“It’s just this semester. It’s been really hard.” Mia was washed again in anxiety. She worried that she was becoming a sociopath. Who even could carry on keeping such a huge secret from her own parents for so long? The lying came so easily, too, at this point, and how would she even begin to tell them everything.

“But you always do well. Keep working hard. We can’t wait to see you.”

“Actually, Mom. I don’t know about winter break this year. I want to come home so, so badly, but there’s an internship that I applied for, and it starts right at the beginning of break. It’s with this museum up at school and practically no undergrads get the position. If I get it...”

There was silence on the other end. “But you’ll miss the holidays. You’ll miss your dad’s gingerbread eggnog and decorating the tree and making paper snowflakes with your high school friends.” Mia had not spoken to her high school friends about any of this and she didn’t want to any time soon.

Her eyes felt hot and the world seemed like it was underwater. Mia spoke in broken little gasps to keep her unsteady breaths silent. She could hear her mom getting teary on the other end. “There’s so much that I want to tell you and dad, but this is a really great opportunity. And I’ll be home for spring break.”

“Mia, you are so bright and so talented, and you are going to do wonderful things. But can’t you come home for just a few weeks before going back to school? The internship starts before Christmas?”

“It’s when they need the most help with archiving and getting everything set up for the New Year. It’s tailored to fit what I’m studying, too, Mom, so I would get to watch restorations happening and help out.”

“I would like you home. The end of the year is for families. Family is what you have in the end, and I know getting started on your career is important, but family is the most important. You are so independent, but you are choosing yourself over us, and that is not what families do.”

Mia wanted to scream that she knew all that and tell her mother about everything she was doing to try to provide for her daughter without the help of anyone because she was capable. She had messed up, but she was strong. She was an adult. She was not going to go running to Mom and Dad for this, and she was not yet ready to tear down the wall she had so carefully and tenuously constructed in a pathetic act of surrender. She would come home on her terms without the factor of the baby weighing the equation on any side. She would not rely on her daughter to ease the blow, the damage she had done to her family, to her relationship with her parents. But she also did not want her parents to use her daughter as a threat or to look at her like a mistake.

“I need to stop thinking. I can’t tell them. I can’t tell them about you until I’ve proven that I can do this,” she whispered into the baby’s ear. She wasn’t thinking straight. It was like her brain had been replaced by something else, like a flailing squid. It was useless as a brain and a heart.



For Mia, Thanksgiving passed in a rainy blur outside her window. It was too warm outside. Everything was muddy and melting, the brown leaves stuck in the dark mud. She lay in bed with her daughter with her arms splayed out like she was falling. She painted and told stories, but she was saying them in a tiny voice that did not fit right in her chest. “I feel like I’m talking to an imaginary friend.” Her daughter could not talk back and Mr. E had not been in touch with her since she had gone missing in action. She had to feel the baby squeeze her fingers and listen to her babbling for her to seem real. She was present. Mr. E was gone as an active figure in her life, though she thought about what he was doing constantly. She had carefully budgeted out the extra allowance her mom had slipped into her bank account after she had forgotten to pay her bill online. She was scraping by, sometimes sleeping through meals.

She did not leave the apartment. She spent the days looking out the window at the slate gray made grayer by the rain, hating herself for what she was doing, battling an inner battle that seemed to not make any sense anymore. It had gotten too far out of control. This could be easily resolved, or maybe not so easily. In any case, there would be some sort of resolution. Her parents

would accept the fact that she had a child, continue to pay for school or not, help her out or not. They were not the kind of people who would leave her on her own. They were kind and good people, but they were also her parents who had raised her to make the right choices, whatever that even meant. Plus Mia held herself up to a high standard, even higher than the high standard her parents had for her. She was not measured on the same scale as her neighbors and classmates and friends. This was because she had always been competing against her own expectations for herself, and she could never catch up with those.

The baby had taken on an even quieter existence somehow, which worried Mia. She was creating waves, a problematic rip current that surged through her daughter's disposition and her parents and her life. She picked up the book with the green jacket. Her own voice was driving her insane, not making sense, rattling off things that sounded absolutely crazy. It would be good to have someone else's words reassure her, words so carefully curated and polished till they gleamed. She hoped Mr. E would not disappoint. This version of his book should be the right copy of the one she had received, with the symbols and pictures and upside down pages that made no sense. Ray seemed to have had a strong reaction, but he already had more than a few screws loose to begin with. His copy at least had to have made enough sense for him to have that kind of reaction, right?

Her copy of the book began with a series of blank pages. It must have been due to that printer error. She grabbed the paperback edition that she had swiped during Ray's fit on the High Line that day. That one had blank pages in front as well, but there were also blank pages clumped in the middle as she kept flipping through. They were ordered differently. Maybe they were different books entirely, or maybe they were different purely for the reason that Mr. E seemed to have tossed the pages up in the air and reassembled them into entirely different texts.

He had done this just by rearranging the order. Then there were those pages with small symbols instead of letters. Then finally a page with words! She read along. It started on “and,” not capitalized, just starting in the middle of a sentence and dragging her along, expecting her to keep up after she had just been dumped in the middle of everything.



ARE YOU KEEPING UP? IS THERE AN ECHO IN HERE? THE WORDS YOU'RE ABSORBING HAVE ALREADY BEEN TAKEN IN, BURIED IN THE RECESSES OF YOUR MEMORY. THEY ARE COMING OUT OF HIDING NOW.



“There’s something wrong with these books. They don’t really make any sense. It’s like they’re wired wrong. The audio is in the video and the picture is in the s-cable. It’s like one of his puzzles. There are letters missing and misspelled. This is unreadable. How did he even get this published?” Her voice was rising. The baby’s eyes were growing wider at the rapid sounds coming from her mother’s mouth. Mia examined the spine before flipping inside to the copyright page. It wasn’t there, where it was supposed to be. “This is ridiculous.”

She could not explain why she was getting so frustrated with the book. This should have held the answers. She had met Ray and swiped his copy of a book by M.R.E., which theoretically should have been a duplicate of her book with the correct pages inside. She gripped it, watching as her fingers momentarily indented the pages. It was a rectangular object in her hand. It should not have had that kind of power over her. Mia reasoned that her anger was built up frustration over being unable to solve the clues that Mr. E had given her for the assignments. Every

annoyance and failure was manifested in this unanswerable book. It just kept asking impossible questions, leading the reader to a solid wall, down false paths in a maze with no exit.

She dropped her book on the floor and picked up Ray's worn copy. She sat down and began reading a similar sort of story that started and stopped in fits, leading her one way before trailing off. She glared at the pages in her hand. This had pushed Ray over the edge. She was certain. She herself had been in a bad mood because she had not seen her family in nearly a full year, not since last winter break. She had not spent Thanksgiving with the people she loved just because she was scared. She could not confront Mr. E about his tricks because she did not know anything about him or how to contact him besides on the phone, and he would just reply with the same annoying non-answers. He would just tell her to continue on and expect her to know what to do. She was sick of it all. "How can this still be considered a novel if there's no resolution. Nothing is in here." She rattled the book in her hand, daring the pages to fall out again so she could randomly slide them back in wherever. It would not make a difference.

Since Mia normally read books inside out, she was always sure they had a definitive sense of closure. She also had to make sure she liked the writing enough before deciding to spend more time with the language. She tested to see if she could really fall into it. But mostly, she needed that closure. A solid beginning and a concrete ending. Ambiguous endings made her palms itch. She was a completionist. She would read things that she didn't particularly enjoy—entire series, even—just because she had to have that sense of being finished. Only after she had read a substantial amount of the beginning and the end would she sink her teeth into the middle. That was what made reading worthwhile to Mia.

She was a busy person. She barely had time to leisurely read, but when she did, like over winter vacation, she searched for books that made her fall into them, get lost, and then find

something of herself by the time she reached the end. These types of books always came with an exit. She would escape the book having gained something from it, and then she could walk away, content. She was a fast reader, so she could plow through thick stacks when she was at home.

For her literature classes, she made lists of the themes and messages in each book, the amount of time it took her to finish reading, her opinion based on a one to ten rating scale for plot, character grids, and pacing graphs. She took these careful measurements so she could then write essays about the books that had scored the highest in her system. But in her free time, she enjoyed perfectly readable books. Ones that did not make her feel like she needed to make lists.

Mr. E had let her down in all aspects, though. His book was unrateable and immeasurable on her system because it was impossible. There was nothing to glean. It was a waste of time and space because there was no clear message. The cover gave away nothing, and that aura of mystery is what initially drew her in. Even if she had read every single version of the book, she would be unable to piece it together to get to the original—what the story *should* be. It was too scrambled, jumbled, tangled. It reminded her of the nest that she had stood in that gallery with the letters bunched together, not forming words, but instead nonsense. The letters were metal squiggles and nothing more. Mr. E did the same thing. Reading his books were like listening to instruments that sounded beautiful but had no consistency in its melody, no indication of when the song was going to end, nothing. He eschewed the conventions for the sake of being opaque. He might as well have given Mia a completely empty book. This one did have blank pages, and Mia figured he would not mind her scribbling on them.

For a book that was about nothing, it sure filled Mia with something—feelings she did not like because she felt like Mr. E was still messing with her, and he was not even here. He was here in the sense that he was inside his own book, but he was inarguable, untouchable in her

criticism and unreachable in real life. She dropped the books to the floor. The baby jumped at the sound. A white scrap of paper fluttered into the air.

It was a receipt and printed on the back in the same light purple ink of the itemized bill from the Chinese grocery store, she read the clue that had gone missing, the missing link that had forced her to take a break. It read as follows: *Do you happen to know where they go, the ducks, when it gets all frozen over? Do you happen to know, by any chance?*



Something clicked right away in Mia's mind. This was not Mr. E speaking. Her mind reeled back, stuck on those words. High school. Tenth grade. English class. Those words were from another book. Mr. E was a writer. He had a wealth of words lining his library. She was sure he had a library. His entire apartment was probably a library. She imagined it as one long floor of bookshelves that were crammed with creased spines full of multicolored papers sticking out as bookmarks. That was where he had gotten a good portion of his clues, and that's what he was doing this time. He was taking credit for using others' words.

This was Holden Caulfield. Mia could not initially get into the *Catcher in the Rye*. But she remembered those ducks. She needed to go to Central Park and puzzle over the pond. It was winter, though. It could be a different location, but Mia was determined to make it to the end now. She wanted to see her artifacts on display inside the renovated Museum. She had taken three weeks off, and in that time, she had painted so that her room had become covered in art. She had told beginning after beginning of stories to her daughter. She had read books after giving up on Mr. E's.

She had hidden inside, cocooning, but now she was ready to go back out into the city with a new perspective and less expectation. She would get stronger, completely mask her revulsion towards the author and the desperate urge to learn what he was going on about, and she would become indifferent. At least she would appear indifferent so nothing could get inside.

But first, she would have to go to Central Park. She took the N uptown and got off at 59th with her daughter bundled close. “We’re here,” Mia said as she wrapped her arms around her daughter’s carrying sack and left the station. She saw a man up ahead with a coat that looked like one her father owned.

Her dad had been known to do spontaneous things sometimes. He couldn’t be here, though. Still, she made a wide circle around him. Mia briefly wondered for a second what would happen if he showed up at her dorm at school only to find out that she was not there and had not been there for some time. Fortunately airfare was high during these times, and the weather had been bad lately in Chicago. New York had not gotten any snow yet. Neither had Delaware, by school, for that matter. It was not like the winters of Mia’s childhood. She remembered the delight that snow days brought as she face planted into the fluffy light layers after the first big snowfall, a freezing smack to shock and invigorate all of her senses. Her impression in the snow had caused her to vividly retain the painful memory.

Central Park was still busy with walkers and strollers and dogs, even on this especially cold winter day. That was the thing about New York—even if an apocalypse were occurring, there would still be at least a few people outside to witness it and assure you that you were both living in the same reality.

Are we living in the same reality while we’re both here within these corners?

Mia rewrapped her scarf so it covered her mouth and nose. She pulled her daughter's hat lower on her head to make sure her ears were buried inside.

“You want a portrait? Ten dollars for two people. I'll only charge you seven with the baby.” This came from a man in front of an easel at one of the entrances. He sat among food carts selling soft pretzels and hot chocolate. He was one of the few brave artists who had decided to sit out in the frigid air today to try and make some money.

Mia shook her head while avoiding eye contact and continued on. His hands, stained with dark charcoal, had to be freezing. She didn't understand why tourists would want the unflattering caricatures anyway that overemphasized their most prominent features. Maybe it's cause they couldn't see them for themselves.

She walked down the paths. Shakespeare's Garden was right behind Belvedere Castle. The winter had withered all of the flowers into dark purple stains that contrasted with their yellow-brown stems. She passed through the garden and continued back on the paved pathways. This park felt out of place, even more so than the High Line. That at least felt somewhat industrial, the iron railroad tracks running perpendicular to the steel skyscrapers. Central Park, though, with its street lamps that glowed hazy yellow and its hilly paths and tunnels, was unnatural in the middle of honking cars and other noise pollution. It was nature at its most unnatural. The grass was dull and flattened, like the low clouds were putting pressure on each blade until they bent and curled under the sky's depression.

Before arriving at her intended destination, she made the rounds to visit what she was thought that Mr. E would also want her to see. The fiction cast in bronze did not bend to the sky's will or natural elements. Alice and Hans Christian Anderson gleamed even in the cloudy weather, gargantuan. Even with the freezing temperatures, children still climbed up onto the

giant toadstool and sidled up next to the oversized book in her lap. Alice always got the most attention. Hans Christian Anderson was nearby with the story of *The Ugly Duckling*, but he barely got a second glance, even though the duckling turns into a beautiful swan. A light snow had begun to fall, light droplets landing on the statues. It slicked right off, but these droplets quickly gave way to full, fat white flakes that clung to Mia's eyelashes and her daughter's red hat.

Mia turned to the pond. There were no swans, no ducks, but instead only fat gray pigeons waddling around, too used to people and weighed down with toxic food scraps to even bother to flap their wings and fly away. The pond had been drained empty for the winter, though a thin sheet of ice glossed over the bottom instead of the normal scummy layer. The sailboats were stored away until summer.

Children still played around the pond in the cold, flying paper airplanes over the frozen water while spinning around in an attempt to catch snowflakes on their tongues and their mittens. It was the first snow of the year. Their babysitters sat glumly on a bench. It was hard to tell who belonged to whom. The babysitters all looked like they were high school and college aged, wanting to go inside where it was warm, but reluctant to keep the kids cooped up inside with all that energy. Some of the planes made it over the width of the pond, just barely, but Mia noticed a few on the bottom that lay crash-landed. She moved closer. They weren't planes. The things in the pond were boats. Mr. E had come through.

A paper boat was folded with a triangle sail at the center. Mia remembered making origami boats and birds when she was little out her old school notes, but she had not done that in ages. She could not recall how to make a boat, but her hands could probably work it out through muscle memory. The snow was already beginning to clump onto it, catching in the grooves. It

would be a shipwreck if that snow melted. Mia already saw the paper becoming damp and transparent. She looked around to make sure none of the guards were watching, and then she jumped over the edge and into the pond, nearly slipping on the ice. She clutched the baby tighter. She heard the kids making a fuss about her being in the pond. She was skating across the glass, grinning at her feat. She slipped and slid her way to the shipwreck, picking it up with her gloved hand. She puffed a cloud of cold air. Her daughter sniffled.

Mia grabbed the message. She took a look around again, catching Alice's eye. The statue was already coated in a light layer of snow, trapped primarily in the lines of her hair and the folds of her dress. They stuck to the pages of the oversized book, filling in the indented letters. The snow sparkled like diamonds had been crunched up into the powdery white. Mia inhaled the fresh scent even though it pierced her lungs. The snow whited out the page. It was going to bury the city over the next few days. She brought back a small snowballed ice chunk for Mr. E, transferring it into a jar at home for it to become a melted puddle of water.

Back in the warmth of the apartment, she left the paper boat out to dry before attempting to unfold and dissect the message buried inside. The paper had become stiff and difficult to take apart. The outside showed faint traces of what was inside, like veins that are visible beneath eyelids. It was a map of the world with an image of a clock pasted in the center. The ink had begun to bleed the words *you're late* into the map, so they ran in fat drips downwards.

Mia frowned. She thought that she had voiced her concerns to Mr. E and that he was sensible enough to give her time to perform these tasks. She thought that she had somehow gotten through to him when she had said that she was not interested in maintaining a fast-paced schedule that required her to meet with him multiple times a week. Now he was telling her to hurry up. She could practically feel his impatience through the paper.

Mia puzzled over the map that had originally rested within the sail of the boat. The clock was at the heart of the paper where all the lines intersected. She held it up to the light. There was something else inside that made the clock stiff. A little card, like a business card, was tucked inside. Mia wormed it out with her fingers, holding the paper up to the light to see the progress of the shadow. Mr. E had clipped the clock from a magazine advertisement. She could see that the backside of it was an interview. She read within the circumference of the watch, about a man who lived a nomadic lifestyle in northern Europe.

The card turned out not to be a business card, but a card from a game that Mia detested because it went on forever and the winners were determined by the first round, anyway. It read, *Go to the Start*. Mia considered this. It could mean that she should hurry up and return to the Museum since it was the Museum of L'origine; it could mean that she should return to the location of the first assignment—the Natural History Museum, or was it the Strand? Or it could be something entirely different because Mr. E did not seem to repeat locations. He probably didn't want multiple items from each location, anyway, for his Museum, though Mia could not be sure. Perhaps he wanted another feather from a displaced bird. She would make a chart to figure out the possibilities. Or maybe it was a boat somewhere since the paper had originally been folded as a boat. She could go down to the Hudson Lines to see if there was something written on the schedules, but tourist boat rides would not be happening at this time of the year. The river would be frozen over for the next three months.

“Do you think we should go for a walk?” she asked her daughter, who only returned the same expression that Mia wore on her own face. “I guess it could just be around the apartment.” The snow had not let up. It continued to coat the city, so Mia pulled sweaters over both her and

her daughter before scooping her up. They toured around the small quarters of the bedroom, seeing the same four corners that they resided within each day.

Then Mia paced through the short hallway to the bathroom. It was always much colder in there, but bright with light. Then over to the kitchen and the small living room that she did not like walking through because she never sat on the couches. They were covered in white sheets like ghosts. She walked through the doorway into the equally untouched dining room. She sped through those couple of rooms. They reminded her of her grandparent's house.

“My grandma and grandpa used to cover all the furniture, too. Sometimes I would hide underneath the sheets and stay very still. I never jumped out at them, though, because I was worried that I would give them a heart attack. I don't know if they ever knew I was under there. I think it was Christmas or maybe Thanksgiving one year when I was little. I hid under the sheets on the couch and laid down flat. Then my dad came into the room. He sat down for a minute next to me, but he didn't know I was there. I knew it was him, though, because of the way he walked around. You'll recognize the way he walks one day. Anyway, he came in and he just felt sad. Like all of his energy was zapped. It was probably because my grandma drove him crazy, but it was something I could feel even through the fabric. I watched his shadow move. I couldn't help him because I was hiding, and I didn't want to get caught or scare him. But don't you ever go hiding from me, okay?”

She went back into the livable side of the house, walking over to the windows. “It's weird that Mr. E is somewhere down there, in one of these buildings, making us zigzag all over the place through this maze to do all these odd things. No one even knows about his Museum. I'm sure that more people would come if he just advertised. I don't know if he wants that.” But once Mia got an idea in her mind, it would not go away until she worked it out. She got to work.

“You’re back? You’ve figured out the next one so soon?” Mr. E asked when Mia turned up on the doorstep of the Museum. She had purposely let a few more days lapse just so it would not seem like he had gotten to her with his last message. She could be stubborn. She had bundled up and ventured out into the white city for the first time since before the snowfall. Everything had turned to gray slush and ice already. New York City could not stay unmarked forever.

“Actually no. I was holding onto a clue for a while, so I’m going to work on that next. These are for you, though.” She deposited the Chinatown files and the jar of water labeled *Holden Caulfield – Central Park*. “These are also for you,” she said as she held up a poster in front of the CCTV camera. The posters read, *New Exhibition! The Museum of L’origine presents the compendium of New York City beginning this January*.

“What is that?” Mr. E spoke through the phone that Mia had clenched between her shoulder and ear.

“You could use the publicity. No one knows about this place, and you could charge a viewing fee to spruce it up a little.” Mia was just trying to be helpful, but she knew deep down that Mr. E was not interested in viewers. He only desired visitors who had the vision and curiosity to come see for themselves, unassisted.

“I don’t think so. No. Dispose of those posters in one of the dumpsters behind you. You think we’ll be ready by January?” He laughed. Mia thought that they could arrange for the Museum to be ready in the next couple of weeks. How long did he intend on drawing this out for anyway? She could not continue to be his “research assistant” forever. He could not have the mess inside the Museum forever either. She thought back to the piles of familiar knickknacks and junk that Ray had been throwing that day on the High Line. She took a look inside, pressing

her forehead against the icy windowpane. She couldn't tell if anything was missing. There was still so much clutter, and most of the items had found their way from the shelves to the ground. The shelves instead held file folders propped up like pictures on a wall. They were disturbingly familiar to Mia. She looked among the mess on the floor for her jar, her candies, her crayon doodles that she had been delivering over the past months.

“The light is disappearing earlier in the day. The clocks have been turned back, and it's just going to keep getting darker until after the new year.”

Mia was just going to add that the sun was indeed setting earlier, so more guests would be attracted to the Museum if it remained open throughout the winter, lit up by its singular light bulb. But Mr. E said his goodbyes and hung up. Mia sighed. She had more or less at this point accepted the fact that as long as she was tied to this job, she would be running around in the dark, blind to how the strings were being pulled and what Mr. E's intentions were until he got the Museum in running order.

She considered setting up a camera of her own in front of the Museum. Mr. E had given her one that she had refused to use, and he had to come out from wherever he was, in order to place her folders on the shelves and move the display around. That meant that he would be visible to outsiders if they looked inside the small Museum windows. He had rejected the posters that she had made. Her mind spun with other possibilities.



“What kind of sign off is that?” Mia grumbled to herself and into her daughter’s ear as she stomped back down the street, careful not to slip on patches of ice on the salted sidewalks. There was slush in the gutter and pure white dripping from the sky. “It’s really winter now.” It was December. Mia wore sunglasses because the snow was too bright and the ice magnified the light. She surged forward, passing the street to turn down to get to the apartment. She felt the change in the air, enjoying the bite of the cold. She marched farther downtown.

“That book was totally bizarre. I tried to sell it back, but they wouldn’t take it. Who writes like that anyway? It was like he was inside my head, but it still didn’t make any sense.”

Mia slowed down. Instead of stomping past a man and a woman talking to each other as they walked together, she hung back.

“Did it have chapters? Was it anything like *S/Z*?”

“I haven’t touched that since grad school. No, not quite. It was all over the place. There were no demarcations for time. There were no chapters at all. I had no idea what was going on, but I felt like I had to keep reading. Like if I stopped reading, maybe I would stop existing. It

was mad.”

“Then why did you try to get rid of the book? Wouldn’t you want to bury it if you felt like it was controlling you and dipping into your thoughts?”

“The book wasn’t my life. It was like the author was in my head, though, and like he had made me write it all down without my knowledge of doing so. My voice was there, but I would never say any of those things, like my thoughts were sleepwalking.”

Mia wouldn’t normally have had the gumption to interrupt strangers on the street, but she had to know. “Are you talking about a book by M.R.E? It has a green cover with a fallen tree on the front and an ‘X’ that’s off-centered? The pages are printed in the wrong order and it’s a mess to read and there are a bunch of symbols that don’t seem to mean anything, but you get this terrible feeling that you’re losing your mind and none of the connections lead anywhere, like a broken fuse? And it’s not quite your life, but it easily could be, even though it’s not in chronological order and there’s no plot?”

The couple stared at her as if she were insane. She had turned into that crazy man Ray on the High Line. “It’s actually *The End of the Play* by Michael John Chase,” the man said.

Mia had seen an abundance of those books on the subway, recognizable by the loopy font on the cover. Mia had attempted to stumble through one of Michael John Chase’s books when she was in eighth grade, but it had gone way over her head at the time. She was familiar with his style, though. She knew that all the insanity was in the footnotes.

“Oh, okay, never mind then.” Mia hurried away, her cheeks steaming up in the cold. She was happy that she could hide behind the dark shade of her sunglasses. “That’s why you don’t talk to strangers,” she spoke to her daughter, even though she was happy she had spoken up. Otherwise the book that they were talking about would have been a mystery to Mia forever, and

it would have bothered her for years. She had tucked the book into her daughter's carrier to dip into if she had a spare moment today. She thought about going to the library, but instead she decided to take a walk around the park.

Washington Square Park is a circle with spokes extending outward from the center, like a bicycle wheel. There was an old violin lying on the ground with the bow resting diagonally across the instrument as she entered from the west side. No one was around, and Mia had not played since high school. She had given up violin once starting college, not even bothering to bring hers from home to practice. There was no time for anything. But her fingers itched, despite of the numbing cold. She picked it up off the ground.

Maybe this was a sign from Mr. E. Music had tempo and that had to do with days passing and time and rhythm. Her mind had been making these jumps lately. She was sure it was a direct result of thinking in the mindset of someone else as she tried to predict Mr. E's next move. She grabbed the battered instrument off the ground. No one rushed at her to reclaim it. She nudged her daughter's head over to her other shoulder so she had space to play. She tucked the chinrest under her neck and placed her fingers on the taut strings. Muscle memory. She played. She played softly, then violently. She slashed the bow across the strings like she was playing her own arm. It came back naturally. It's a shame you can't hear the melody, but the impromptu performance was lovely. The people around her clapped, and Mia regained consciousness as her numb fingers throbbed.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"I don't know."

"Where'd you get that?"

“I just found it here,” she said. She felt exhilarated. She tucked the violin under her arm. It did not seem like it was from Mr. E. There was no message inside or tucked into the strings. Mia checked her phone for the time.

“So violins are out. If Mr. E were talking about Daylight Savings Time, then it would be an hour back or forward. Maybe he wants me to do something with Benjamin Franklin?” She looked at the base of the Washington Square Arch. She thought about her classmate Dan’s study abroad trip to Paris. This would be what he would be seeing, but this version was smaller and less majestic. This arch was not open anymore, but she would not be surprised if Mr. E wanted her to climb inside. She kept walking in circles, passing the arch. There was nothing on it regarding Daylight Savings, but there was a “Save Greenwich Village” flyer that had slashes through Starbucks and NYU expansion.

“Keep moving, keep moving,” a small man in a vest yelled from the corner. “You’re going to be late. It’s 1:25!” He pushed students along, constantly peering down at his arm, which was covered in watches.

“Thanks, Big Ben,” a kid shouted as he ran across the street as the little man held his hand out to stop a taxi from passing.

Mia pulled the message out of her daughter’s carrier. She looked at piece of paper that was formerly the boat. It was a map. She examined the gridlines, not paying any attention to the letters that had run. “Greenwich Village,” she said to herself. “Greenwich Meridian. We’re here. We’re in the center.” She walked over to the fountain. In the middle of the fountain, she exhaled out a breath of disbelief as troupe of breakdancers tossed around a few saltshakers. They were all silver. They could be part of the act, but when Mia approached, one of the dancers waved to her.

“You want to volunteer? Just step right up, over here,” he said.

“No, no thank you.”

“We never miss, and afterwards, we have something to give to you,” he said, shaking the saltshakers. Salt spilled over their shoulders.

Mia tried to protest. They swept her into the fountain, which was drained for the winter, just like the pond in Central Park.

“You’re the reader, right?” the man with the blue hat asked as he placed her in the lineup of volunteers to flip over.

“I’m the research assistant.”

“He said you’d say that. He wants to know if you’ve been reading his book.”

Mia was surprised. She lowered her sunglasses to get a better look at the dancers. As she slipped down her glasses, she exposed who she was, her face giving her away and confirming that she was the person who she was supposed to be at that moment. The other three breakdancers were getting the crowd that had circled around the fountain pumped up while this one talked to her. Mr. E had never had any of the others speak directly to her about his work or anything that could be traced back to him. This was practically the first time he had verbally acknowledged he was anything besides invisible.

“What else did he say that I would respond to?”

“He said you might say that you were a student, a kid in hiding, a mom, or the recipient. He had a pretty long list, but he said you’d probably respond to reader or something to do with research first.”

“What about him? Did he have a list of adjectives to identify by?”

“Well you know him. He’s a mystery. E doesn’t even go by his real name anymore. Every time I talk to him, he tells me a different name.”

Mia absorbed this information, trying to read between the lines. Maybe this was a test. Mr. E usually did not allow his assistants to be so free with information and words. Or perhaps she had been asking all the wrong questions until now. “Does he live on the High Line?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen the man. He just talks to me sometimes. I picked up that phone by his little Museum once and he hasn’t left me alone since. I’ve only been back like twice, but he got my cell number and calls me up with all sorts of weird requests. I try to humor him because he’s not the kind of person you should mess with. I hadn’t talked to him in a while, but he told me to pick up a paper bag that was left underneath that bench over there. He left me these saltshakers and said someone would come by to pick them up soon. He said to hold onto them until you came along. So here we are.” Mia still could not understand how Mr. E practically had the entire city playing for him as his pawns. Everyone who had ever come into contact with him was forever entangled in the puzzle as a piece in the bigger game. Mia would never be able to get rid of him, even after she quit for good.

“Repeat the rules after me,” the breakdancer who was wearing a blue hat shouted. “Don’t move an inch.”

“Don’t move an inch.”

“Stay in the center.”

“Stay in the center.”

“Keep your heads down.”

“Keep our heads down.”

Mia looked down. The group of volunteers was actually off-centered so the performers could jump from the platform where the fountain jets were located. The elevation would give them more momentum for when they hurled themselves over the seven bodies that they had lined

up. A small ice patch was located near Mia's foot. She fixed her eyes at it, thinking back to the frozen shipwreck in Central Park. If she had another tiny paper boat, it would slide right across the frozen bubble of water and drown in the springtime.

Mia kept her chin pressed down into her chest so her lips rested on top of her daughter's head. The baby tried to look up as the men one by one sprang into the air, rolling themselves into balls or stretching outwards like they were Superman in flight to leap over the line of people. Mia could not see them, but she listened to the applause around her and felt the whoosh of the bodies overhead. She did not like being forced to participate. Gravity stopped for a moment to let the dancers remain in suspense.



THEY ARE UP IN THE AIR BECAUSE I HIT PAUSE. ISN'T IT FUNNY HOW YOU CAN JUST PAUSE IN THE MIDDLE OF A PAGE, A SENTENCE, A WORD, AND EVERYTHING JUST STOPS? THE MOMENTUM FROM THE LEAP DROPS, FALLING FLAT ON THE SURFACE. YOU CAN GET UP, STRETCH YOUR LEGS, WALK TO THE KITCHEN TO GET A SNACK, AND PRACTICE HANDSTANDS IN THE HALL. YOU CAN CLOSE THIS BOOK HERE. YOU CAN SLIP IN A BOOKMARK IF YOU WISH. TIME DOES NOT MATTER HERE. EVERYTHING WILL WAIT. IT WILL WAIT FOR A FEW MINUTES UNTIL YOU RETURN FROM THE BATHROOM. IT WILL WAIT FOR A DAY IF YOU GET TOO WRAPPED UP IN WORK TO READ. IT WILL WAIT WHEN YOUR MOTHER PLACES IT BACK ON THE SHELF WHILE TIDYING UP AND IT WILL WAIT WHEN YOU FORGET THAT'S ITS THERE, AND THAT YOU HAD EVEN MADE IT THIS FAR THROUGH WHEN YOU FIND IT AGAIN A DECADE LATER, STASHED BETWEEN ENCYCLOPEDIAS. IF THERE ARE STILL PHYSICAL BOOKS, THEN, ANYWAY. MAYBE YOU'RE SO FAR INTO THE FUTURE THAT BOOKMARKS ARE OBSOLETE AND SALTSHAKERS ARE RELICS. THE STORY WILL STILL BE HERE,

PATIENTLY WAITING WITH THE PERFORMANCES MID-LEAP, BUT YOU WILL HAVE CHANGED AND THAT WILL CHANGE THE STORY FOR YOU.



“Thank you. Give it up for our brave volunteers and give us a little silver to show your thanks.”

“These are for you.” The three saltshakers were placed into Mia’s hands. She had expected a watch or something else to do with time since she had figured out it was the Greenwich Meridian Line. She considered that she would have probably figured out the saltshakers were for her at some point anyway, even if she had not figured out the Greenwich clue. They looked like the ones that her parents had at home, though these were new, with the price stickers still stuck to the bottoms. Yet they were heavy with salt. Mia could feel the weight of the message in her hands.

At the apartment, she dumped the salt out onto the kitchen table. It rained white like an avalanche speeding along, like the snow outside. Bad luck be damned. Mia thought this whole thing was a bizarre occurrence that was just one outcome of chance. Luck and superstitions were inconsequential. Probably. She tossed a pinch of salt over her shoulder, just in case. There was nothing but salt in the first shaker. She unscrewed the next one and poured it onto the table. The grains ran against the grain of the wood. It was empty inside. She crossed her fingers and opened the third. If there was nothing inside, she would really not believe in these superstitions. Tossing the salt over her shoulder would be a waste if she did not get lucky on this last one. Mr. E was setting up her fate. He was playing with her actions and outcomes with his fallible hands. She

would not be mad at chance. She would be upset at the futility of working for a mad author. Salt spilled out. She poked a finger into each saltshaker, searching for a rolled up note or a trinket that might serve as a clue.

“So he’s left us with nothing again,” Mia said to her daughter. There was salt in her hair. Mia let the grains run through her fingers, allowing the granules to roll around her fingertips to feel the grit. She could feel each corner and each side. In addition to the salt, Mr. E had loaded the saltshakers with grains of white rice. Mia’s mother did that at home to keep the salt from clumping. “There has to be something more. I don’t understand why he would give me three saltshakers. Was there a sale on saltshakers instead of salt and pepper sets?” She rolled a grain or rice between her fingers. Her fingers came away gray.

Mia took her glasses off and held it closer to the rice. Everything was still blurry. She got up and paced around to rifle through the kitchen drawers. Sadie’s grandmother was a very neat lady. The apartment had been nearly empty when Mia had initially moved in. Most of the drawers held nothing but air and sometimes a sachet of potpourri or a flyswatter. But when Mia was looking for a flashlight one evening in the summer after a storm had caused the power to go out, she found that the pantry was stocked with first-aid kits, cans of soup, and a twenty pound toolkit that made Mia reevaluate the physical condition of Sadie’s grandmother and also question why she was so prepared for emergencies. Mia found what she needed after a few minutes of rummaging around in that big old toolkit. She walked back to the table with a magnifying glass. With the help of that fifth eye, Mia was able to make out the smeared microscopic writing that told her what to do next.



Apparently what was next involved returning the saltshakers. Mia could not understand why Mr. E would put in such an effort to have her go back to the store he had bought these from and ask for a refund. He had used them. He had filled them up with grains of puzzling logic and had handed them over to Mia to sift through. And she had. She had scoured through the grains as if she were on an archeological dig or attempting to locate a needle in a haystack. Only in this case, the grains of rice stood out.

The message simply said, *RETURN* in miniscule blocky letters that had to have been done with a paintbrush made up of a single strand. Mia read over the twenty-six grains of rice under the gaze of the magnifier, rolling them around to see if there was anything else. There were letters and street names that Mia scribbled down on a sheet of paper. She would have to go to the department store from where Mr. E had purchased the shakers, and try to explain that she wanted to exchange them.

In her mind, she made of list of all the possible things she could exchange for the price of three saltshakers to drive Mr. E crazy. It would be something that would drive him nuts like a

singing, dancing squirrel or maybe one of those ferret cat toys that she could control by remote to make it roll around uncontrollably. Maybe she would even pitch in some of her own money to buy a toy helicopter to follow him around.

It did not matter what Mia's plans were to surprise Mr. E with in the end because the refunds desk could only replace the saltshakers with the same saltshakers or the matching peppershakers. "They were sale items and they were used." The man at the customer service desk spoke in a monotone voice. Mia had washed them out, though, and shined them back up to remove the breakdancers' and her own fingerprints. They were in perfectly good condition, just like new. The stickers were even still intact. "You don't have a receipt either. We only give refunds or make exchanges if you have the receipt and the items purchased are in new condition. We can't sell these. They were on sale in the first place."

Mia could not see anything wrong with the three original saltshakers, and she had inspected them under the magnifying glass.

"I can have three replacement saltshakers sent to you, though, if these are defective."

Mia could not see how all three saltshakers could be defective. If one didn't work, there was a backup, and if that one didn't work, there was a backup for the backup.

"You have to drop these off at the post office. As soon as they are received, your new order will process."

It sounded like a lot of work to Mia, but it seemed to be what Mr. E had wanted. Perhaps this was all part of his plan. It was a convoluted, inefficient return policy. "That would be great," she said. She printed the Museum's address on the shipping label. Mr. E would be confused when he opened a package of three silver saltshakers, sealed in plastic, identical to the ones he had used weeks ago on a silly little assignment to Washington Square Park. It was not as good as

an annoying toy, but the senselessness of it all would hopefully get to him. “Do you have any other information for me?” Mia asked the man at the desk. She was expecting her next clue to seamlessly fall into place.

“Just that you should expect the replacement saltshakers in the mail twelve to twenty-seven business days after the defective ones are received,” he said.

Mia felt like she was just running Mr. E’s errands again. She nodded and took a walk around the store. It was too cold and soggy to go for a walk around the city today, anyway. She could do some of her own errands while she was out.

Mia and the baby walked past the perfume counter. Their noses tickled with overpowering scents that mingled together. “Free sample of Luck.” Mia was spritzed with something that made her eyes water.

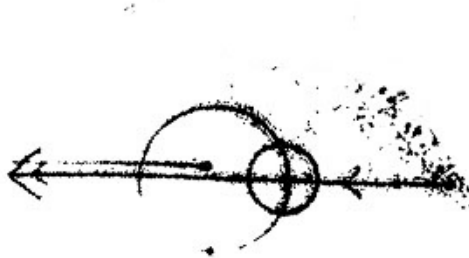
“No thank you.” The damage was already done, though. “Should I name you that? Luck? Lucky? You smell much better than that, though. If I put your smell in a bottle right now, you’d smell like baby powder, wipes, and winter. And the apartment. Maybe if I had bottled luck, we would get through this insane job, my parents would welcome us home, and you would have a name. We would grow up just fine.”

Mia wished she could bottle up many scents, many memories. She wanted to smell her mother’s scent of pine candles, lemon dish soap, and late Sunday nights; her father’s scent of newspaper ink and library books; those summer vacation days when she could sit at home and waste her time by watching reruns of sitcoms and mindlessly float through the haze of sunscreen and air conditioning until her whole vacation seemed like one endless day; or her days as a student with the particular smell of the University of Delaware’s classrooms and getting to class early.

“You need another sweater.” Mia whispered this into the baby’s ear. She shrieked at the concept, but allowed Mia to browse through the racks of sweaters. The mannequins in the store freaked Mia out. They had always been too uncanny for her to feel comfortable around them. The way that they held still in neutral poses reminded her of some of the models that came to pose for her life drawing classes. Mannequins had an especially unnatural air about them now when Mr. E seemed to be around every corner. He could be anyone. He could be that man at the customer service desk or the old lady in the gallery. He could even be a mannequin here in this huge store filled with mattresses and blouses that all smelled the same and perfectly folded khakis. “I’m being irrational. Totally paranoid,” Mia muttered to herself, though her daughter was there, too. She grabbed the sweater and checked out quickly, giving the cashier a once-over until he felt uncomfortable enough to ask if she was okay and if she had a problem finding something.

“Yes, but that’s not your fault. He’s always hiding things just out of my reach, and if he didn’t pay me and if I wasn’t so annoyingly curious, I would quit. I would. I would quit, and then I don’t know what I would do. Maybe I would panic and live under a park bench and go totally insane, but of course that wouldn’t happen because I’m me and she’s me too, and I have to take care of her. Living under park benches is not acceptable. Maybe I would go home, though, or maybe I would run away again to another state, and I could change my whole identity, and no one would ever have to find out about this.”

“Would you like a comment card?”



Mia did not hear from Mr. E for the next few weeks. It was like she was in that hiatus period once again. She was not actively avoiding him. She was just waiting for his replacement saltshakers to arrive and to see his reaction for once, or at least hear it. He was not usually this silent, nor was his presence so empty. Mia usually felt like he was there in some capacity, in the clues, in the phone calls, but he had not made any contact with her and so she felt worried. Mia decided to give it another few days before doing anything about it.

She distracted herself by not calling her parents. She continued to take her daughter on walks. She had grown fond of the walks through the city, just to see new sights and discover new and unfamiliar corners. She received fewer questions and comments now, perhaps because she looked less lost. She walked all over lower Manhattan with the baby until their noses were numb and their fingers had turned red. Mia's socks were full of cold slush. It was strange to have her mind so free. On his assignments, she felt like Mr. E was accompanying her, watching her too closely. She had learned to think like him in order to solve his riddles. Now that she was in her own headspace again, she could not get his thought process out of her mind. She had not set out

to find anything in particular on this Wednesday afternoon. She had just gone outside to see the people that tended to circulate around these streets—the dog walkers, the nannies, the performers, the tourists with their big cameras that hung around their necks.

She walked past the Strand, browsing through the dollar book carts outside, absentmindedly, as she kept a hopeful eye out for Mr. E, either in book or human form to appear. She looked over each time the glass doors swung open. When she was not distracted by the comings and goings of strangers, she was flipping through books that she could see in Mr. E's imaginary hands. There were no secret messages, no folded paper boats, nothing. Mia did not even see the words printed on the pages. They were empty for her.

There was an old suitcase propped open on the corner full of free books, all piled up on top of one another. Mia paused to lean over and read the titles. One book caught her eye with the title *Sight Reading Birds on Wires*. She came across annotations in green ink on the pages curling through the bars of sheet music for a rhapsody. She focused on the shape of the letters. The cursive was difficult to read, slanted sharply to the right like the wind had blown the letters over. She read the notes. B-A-C sharp-D, nonsense. The note next to the notes just indicated when to push the pedals down and when tricky parts were coming up.

She continued downtown. She counted six dogs, four babies in strollers, twelve coffee cups, two homeless people, and five pigeons along the next two blocks. At 14th Street, she walked when the crosswalk lit up, boots clomping over the white stripes painted on the ground like a barcode. She felt like she was seeing signs everywhere, only she didn't know how to read them. Two Japanese tourists pointed up at a building behind her and snapped massive camera lenses upwards. Mia passed them before turning to look too.

There were digital red numbers rapidly counting up or counting down on the face of the building on the corner. Next to it, there was a swirling gold vortex with steam coming out of the black hole at the center. A hand was raised above it all. On the next building, there was a black sphere with just a sliver of white creeping around at the edge. It looked like an eyeball just beginning to wake up.

“You think that’s their national debt?” a boy with a British accent asked his friend beside him.

“Maybe it’s world population growth?” he responded.

The Japanese tourists were still snapping pictures of all three buildings.

“That’s the time,” a disheveled man in a dingy overcoat approached them and commented.

Mia turned away, pretending to be disinterested while still listening to the explanation.

“On the left, that’s the hour, then the minutes, seconds, milliseconds, etcetera. Over there, you have the moon,” he continued. The eye was the shadow of the moon. Mia walked away as he said, “it shows you the changing phases,” before holding out his hands for money.

As she continued walking, she happened to stumble upon a flea market, set up on the north end, the backside, of Union Square. The greenmarket that occurred everyday was also set up, in addition to the vans that had pulled up advertising puppies and kittens up for adoption. There were crowds in every corner. Mia could barely slip by, doubled in size because of her daughter. She had been bigger for a year now, first internally and now externally. She elbowed and wedged her way around the park. There were only potatoes and turnips for sale at this time of the year.

She browsed the trinkets of the flea market that looked like it belonged in Brooklyn. It looked a lot like Mia's grandparents' basement. There was a lot of mismatched silverware and vintage postcards. There were heaps of broken cameras and little statues of elephants with their trunks up. There were boxes of rings and brooches that had stood the test of time, developing a brassy sheen like a sepia photograph left in a garage for half a century. The age had value, character.

Mia walked over to a set of nesting dolls that was placed on a blanket that a vendor had set up on the ground as a last-minute booth. These sellers had jumped on the bandwagon of ridding themselves of their trinkets. Mr. E would have a field day among all the items, the stories, but Mia could not be sure what he would want most because she still could not figure out what united the items in his museum. Plus Mr. E was scrupulous about the items that he chose. He nearly had rejected the violin that worked perfectly well that she had found in Washington Square. He said that he had no use for it since he couldn't play.

She picked up the nesting dolls thinking about how they would look on that infinity of shelves, how they repeated one another, replicated down to the swirling detail—almost. The smaller ones were simplified though still intricate. Her mother had sets of nesting dolls all over the house. She had bought Mia a set with painted flowers when she was little. Mia enjoyed twisting them open, popping the hidden dolls out from the previous larger one until she found the little bean of a baby in the center.

Now they made her think of her layers of selves, all those different Mias buried within her current outer self. She thought back to that day that she had hallucinated and saw that girl running around the kitchen, all different ages. Mia wondered if those inner layers, all those past selves, were still inside her and what they would say to her now.

Mia went back to grasping the set of dolls in her palm, examining the first one. Her outermost layer was her mask, securely in place. Most of the time, anyway. She kept her heart behind her forehead, between her eyes. Sometimes it floated up in space without her awareness. She sported accidental rings around her eyes, and she kept her mouth in a hard line, cemented shut, running perpendicular to the line that creased the center of her forehead to keep the mask in place.

This set of dolls was red and smiling. Mia's mother had a set that each wore a different painted expression. The outside doll was happy, the next grumpy, the next sad, the next mad, and the innermost tiny doll wore an expression that Mia was never quite able to pinpoint, even though she identified with that one the most. Her features were less clear than the rest because she was so small. Her mouth was a smudge and her eyes seemed to look everywhere.

Her parents had used that set of dolls when Mia went through a stage in preschool when she seemed to be unhappy all the time. She would not interact with her classmates. Sometimes she would space out and stare out the window or at her hands in class. She would refuse to talk, like she had been sucked up into the medium doll and then the big one, all consuming her little one without a clear expression. They had tried using those dolls at therapy one time.

The psychologist had worn gray slacks that had gone fuzzy and a striped collared shirt beneath a neutral sweater. It might have been beige or navy. Mia did not know he was a therapist. Her dad had told her that he was a doctor, but she got to play with toys the entire visit so she did not mind. He pulled out her mother's dolls and asked her to point to the one that looked the most like she felt after each question.

“How does going to school make you feel?”

Grumpy face.

“Are the kids nice to you?”

“How do you feel when the other kids talk to you at recess?”

“How about spending the day with your mom?”

“What about your dad?”

“Do you like when you all go to things together?”

“How do you feel about looking different from your parents?”

The game stopped as soon as she pointed to the doll with the little smudge for a mouth. The therapist had picked the tiny bean of the doll up and held her up to the light. “Do you think she’s smiling or frowning?” Mia shrugged. She never had to go back to that doctor again, though. When her dad drove her home, she asked to see the dolls again and had slipped the littlest one out and had hidden it at the back of her underwear drawer. It was still there. Sometimes Mia pulled it out to roll it between her fingers when she was absentmindedly thinking, unsure of what she was feeling.

This set of dolls at the flea market did not have an abundance of expressions. They were all smiling and pleasant looking, but Mia decided that she could do some studies and alterations to improve them. Before getting to work, she rolled them on the floor, popping them open with her daughter in her lap as they sat on the bedroom floor. “Look, it’s us, Bean,” Mia said. She closed the larger medium one together. “This is me. And this one is you,” she said, holding the smiling baby in her palm. “One day you’ll be this one too, but for now you are just a tiny seed and can rest right here.”

Then she pulled out her paints. She mixed the orange and red with white to get a peach to seal over the mouths and eyebrows. She gave them the faces of her mother’s dolls at home, with eyebrows that curved up or slanted down and mouths that grinned and frowned and wavered. She

left the baby smiling and untouched. Then she varnished over them so her brushstrokes would be imperceptible. It was like they had been made this way originally. They would go well in Mr. E's display, though Mia could not exactly say why. She had not yet seen her other contributions to the Museum.

That evening, as Mia was feeding her daughter and watching the nesting dolls dry on the windowsill with their new faces, her phone rang. She picked it up right away, sure it was Mr. E. He always showed up as a private number, unlisted, even though she had the Museum number programmed into her cellphone. Maybe he was calling from where he was really hiding. He could be anywhere and anyone in this city. She could have passed him everyday or maybe she had even ridden next to him on the subway at some point while under his employment.

But the phone call was from her former roommate Sadie. First Sadie asked if Mia was okay, and Mia nodded into the phone until realizing that Sadie could not see her. "I hope everything is going well. My grandma says that her most recent Master Card bill might have been mailed to her New York address instead of being forwarded to Florida. Could you check the box and let me know if you find anything?"

Mia agreed to look.

"I really hope you're alright and that you're seeing a therapist or someone you can talk to about the mental stress. Taylor is also going to take a leave of absence—What was that noise? Are you at a park? It sounds like a kid is crying." The baby had started sniffing because Mia had paused her dinner.

"It's just noisy here. You know, New York."

“Oh, wow, it just sounded really loud. Well, Taylor’s taking a leave of absence because he finally broke up with Taylor. It’s been really hard on him, though. Plus he’s been really struggling with biology this semester. I hope you both rest up and feel better when you get back.” Their friend boy-Taylor had been dating girl-Taylor. Their similarities stopped with their names, so Mia was relieved to hear that news and hoped that Taylor would feel better after his true and real mental exhaustion.

“Thanks, Sadie. For everything. I’m getting better. It’s just taking time. It’s taking a lot of time, but I hope to be back soon.”

Mia patted her daughter on the back before gathering her up into her arms. She grabbed the slip of paper stuck to the door with the mailbox code. Mia had not bothered to check the mailbox since moving in because she had not given her address to anyone while she was in hiding. She had not left a forward mailing address to her school, and she wondered how much mail she had accumulated in the past months.

The mailbox was stuffed with coupons and advertisements and a slew of bills. Mia would have to send them to Sadie’s grandmother, and probably a letter or some sort of note to thank her, to try to explain. Or maybe it was better to pretend that she had not even really been here, dropping in and staying in the cobwebbed corners before disappearing again with everything exactly in place as it had been before she had shown up. She filtered through it back upstairs, rubber banding the bills into a bundle and tossing out the advertisements that had already expired.

There was something for Mia. It made her heart speed up. What if it was a note from home or someone at school? Her mother could be on a plane right now coming to drag her back or take her daughter and leave Mia to deal with the consequences.

There was a map folded up inside the envelope. The postmark dated back a few weeks to when Mr. E's phone calls and requests had stopped coming. She remembered that she had given him her New York address when she had filled out his job forms. Mia's relief was quickly replaced by worry that something had gone wrong. She didn't know if it was because she was finding the map just now, much later than intended, but it carried a sense of urgency. She would follow the map to go to the next location first thing in the morning, as soon as the sun came up and before the crowds descended.



More than one million people live on the island of Manhattan. There is no shortage of noise. But on Sunday mornings as the sun comes up, it feels eerily quiet. Mia tiptoed down the stairs, afraid to make noise and pierce the calm that some would find peaceful but Mia just found disturbing. After months of living in the city, she had grown accustomed to the constant sounds that used to irritate her and keep her awake at night. Now the sirens, the chatter, the construction sounded like static, and the silence of Sunday morning was unnerving.

She walked across the avenues according to arrows on the map. There was a jogger in a maroon sweat suit and a bright yellow hat. There was an old man bundled up with a plaid scarf walking his corgi who had a matching plaid scarf around its neck. Other than that, no one was around. Mia followed the winding path farther downtown and over towards the Lower West Side until she was walking along the Hudson River. It was beautiful as the sun continued to rise higher into the sky and illuminate everything. The blue water, so dark it was almost black, became dappled with strokes of orange from the sun. The buildings sparkled. The melting snow

shone. Mia could barely appreciate the beauty, though. She was too busy looking for something more.

Mr. E had pinpointed certain intersections along the map by making fat dots in red marker. Mia stopped at the street signs, examining the area around them. The first mark did not seem to mean anything. There was nothing at all around besides a few joggers running in opposite directions, bundled up and puffing steam.

Mia shifted the baby carrier around so her daughter could continue to try and get some sleep. She had woken her up early when the apartment was still dark and cold. The baby's eyes had sprung open like those doll eyes that pop open as soon as they are placed upright. She had gotten used to her mother's flightiness. Mia was sure that she would pay later, when her daughter's sleep schedule would revert back to wildly fluctuating. For now, she settled down.

The next marker held nothing around it, no trinkets lying on the sidewalk, no street performers wearing tinfoil hats, no art sculptures, no cameras in sight. There was some light graffiti and black spots of gum on the sidewalk. She noticed them as she stared at her feet as they walked along the lines drawn out on Mr. E's map leading her to some final destination. There were some scribbles in chalk that read, *chin up*. Mia found the message oddly uplifting. Maybe she was delirious at this hour of the morning. She had not been up this early since those last few weeks before her baby was born, when she would wake up multiple times a night, tangled in her sheets and sweating with worry.

Her Sunday mornings now were much more on par with the rest of society. She enjoyed her lazy Sundays, always giving herself off on the weekends from Mr. E's insane assignments. Her mind had been calm recently anyway, like she had emptied him out of it, just a little. If he and the Museum were on her mind every day of the week, she would go crazy. She gave herself

Saturdays and Sundays to recuperate and not think about the riddles that she would scrawl down and tape to her wall. She liked to spend her weekend mornings cuddled up under the blankets with her daughter, reading to her from whatever book was on her nightstand. She would read until her stomach rumbled or her daughter cried and then she would rouse herself up for milk and toast and tea on these cold winter mornings.

She kept walking down the sidewalk, looking around and feeling like she was not seeing anything, not even where Mr. E had marked the dots. Maybe nothing was left anymore because she had waited too long. She was realizing that she did not have good timing. Sequential order was no longer keeping her life together. Her imagination and mind were constantly churning away these days, with these clues that seemed to spring up when she was not focusing hard on figuring them out and turning out wrong when she thought too hard. She was not trusting herself enough.

The baby cooed, awake. Mia looked down at her daughter's head, at the soft spot that she was always careful to cradle. There was another chalk circle, but instead of words, it was just an arrow pointing forward. She followed the arrow, even though the dots on the map would lead her in another direction shortly. That was the only arrow, so she stopped following it. It only lead to a construction sight that had spilled over onto the sidewalk, blocking it off so pedestrians had to slip by between a sliver of street marked off by neon orange barricades.

Mia turned at the next intersection. There was a stray cat dashing back into another construction site, hopping over the barricades and burrowing in the debris. There was a single dented bicycle wheel u-locked to a signpost missing the sign and missing the rest of the bike. Beside it was another chalk circle with the words *eye to the sky*.

Mia looked overhead. She saw the towering buildings on either side of her. She had moved away from the openness of the river. The sky was turning a pale, watery blue in the dawn, growing rosier by the minute. “What do you think, Sky?” Mia asked as she continued to stay rooted in her spot on the sidewalk just roaming around with her eyes. She narrowed in on what looked like writing on a window shade. She squinted to read the thin letters. There was part of a story written and posted in the window of the building that Mia was looking into. YOU ARE LOOKING AT THIS AND WONDERING WHAT IT MEANS AND WONDERING WHAT A NOVEL IS DOING ON THE WINDOWS OF BUILDINGS ON THE LOWER SIDE OF THE ISLAND. THAT IS A VALID QUESTION. I DON’T HAVE THE ANSWERS FOR YOU RIGHT NOW, BUT THEY WILL COME IN TIME IF YOU ARE A GOOD READER.

Mia followed the twisting path, walking across and then down streets that were made to be like a maze between the buildings in this part of downtown. New York’s grid system soothed Mia, but it did not apply this far down. There were names instead of numbers in consecutive order. “Elizabeth, Mott, Mulberry,” she whispered them into the back of her daughter’s head, trying the names out. Another red dot on the map kept her on the trail. The sun was invisible between the buildings where she was standing. It was much colder in the shadows. *Look up*, a new chalk circle said, much blunter than the first few. So Mia looked up.

I SUPPOSE THERE IS NO SINGLE *RIGHT* WAY TO READ THIS. IT PROBABLY FEELS LIKE SLOPPY READING TO YOU SINCE YOU CAN BARELY SEE THESE MESSAGES, MUCH LESS MAKE ANYTHING OF THEM. YOU HAVE TO READ THEM QUICKLY. THIS CITY IS FAST. I CAN’T SAY IF YOU’RE DOING AN INJUSTICE TO YOURSELF IF YOU SKIM AND RUN AND READ. Maybe you’re looking at it right across the way and it is simply in clear view, and you are reading it in a comfortable armchair in the

middle of the night with a flashlight. Maybe you are reading this on a sunny Thursday afternoon. Maybe you're reading this from a seat of a moving taxi, only catching the tail end of these words. Maybe you're reading from the bus stop. It does not matter how you are reading this, as long as you chose to stop and question how it is meaningful to you. This story changes all the time. It will be here when you come back. But either the story or you or I might look a little different then.

Mia now could not understand how she had not seen the writing. She rarely looked up in the city. She tended to look down at shoes or past faces to read street signs. She was always catching things on the periphery and not head on. It's scary to realize that you are living in panopticon conditions. That is why I so rarely leave. She looked from the outside to the inside facing outside. They were trapped inside the labyrinth.

Mia had picked up the pace, walking downwards across the lines, connecting the dots. With her head tilted back and in the clouds, she nearly bumped into the early morning crowd, just beginning their day. There were shopkeepers sweeping their storefronts and putting out menu boards on the sidewalk. She kept following along and looking for the next page that appeared to her in the windows.

I'd like to give you the chance to have an optimal reading experience, a better view, and a new perspective. This one has just begun to stretch the limits. If you will permit me, I want to truly welcome you into the story.

Mia walked through the glass doors of Poet's House. The dots and links stopped and there were no more connections. She had never been down this way. The building was all glass and metal and white walls alongside the Hudson. There was a middle-aged man with his nose in a book and a cup of coffee in his hand at the white front desk. Mia could see the steam from the

coffee swirling upwards in the sunlight. The book in his hand had a clear cover that served as a window to view the few words that were printed on the page behind it. He did not look up when she entered, so she proceeded to head up the staircase. The building was stocked with chapbooks and volumes of poetry that Mia had never read. There was a glass bubble inside with a glass case of original notes by Walt Whitman. Mia appreciated the looping old script and crossed out handwriting. There was a lady in a thick sweater napping in a chair.

Footsteps echoed up the stairs. “Mia?” the man at the front desk said after arriving at the top of the staircase. Mia nodded. “This is for you.”

The book slipped into her hands, the plastic cover sheet warm from where he had been holding it. It smelled new and felt crisp. She flipped through the pages and an envelope fell onto the floor. “Who gave you this?” Mia asked.

The man said he didn’t know. He said it had arrived a couple of weeks ago in the morning before opening. It had not been there at closing the previous night. It was opened to the page where the letter was tucked. It said to deliver the book to Mia X. Reid who should be arriving within the next few days. She will be carrying a baby in a red carrier and look like she is looking. Mia was dissatisfied and uncomfortable with his answer that still was not really an answer.

“Have you read it already?” Mia asked.

“It’s unfinished. It says so right at the front that it’s incomplete, so I can’t say that I’ve read it all. I thought it was a delivery from the publicity team of a small press, like an advanced reader copy because this author hasn’t written anything in over a decade. It doesn’t quite belong here because it’s not poetry, exactly, but I’m not quite sure what it is. It was too open for me not to look. It was confusing and voyeuristic but I wasn’t able to tell exactly what was fiction and

what wasn't. I'm going to attend the museum reopening, though, whenever that happens. I need to find out what happens and how it ends."

"The Museum?"

"The museum. It says that there's a museum project going on, a renovation and a grand reopening. It's supposed to be an interactive experience to let the readers become part of the story and see the events that influenced it. Something like that. Sounds intriguing and will hopefully make more sense than the book. But I didn't finish it, and it's not finished, so I can't give a more definitive statement. I have to say, though, it is weird speaking to you right in front of me. It's like meeting a character." Mia's face drained of all color as she clenched the book more tightly in her hand.

"I have to go."

"Alright. Well, I hope to see you at the museum project."

"Right."

Mia fled Poet's House. Getting back to the apartment proved to be harder in the shuffle of the people oblivious to the story going on above their heads. No one was looking up except for a toddler nestled in a stroller and she could not read yet.

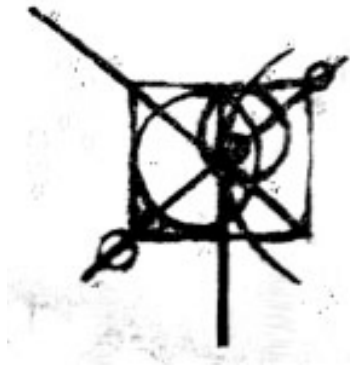
She sped past the apartment. The gray streams melting down the streets. The paintings for sale mounted to the wrought iron fence. The church. The classrooms. The basketball court. The six schnauzers with sticks in their mouths. The fat pigeons. The professor arriving out of the subway.

The Museum was closed. It was always closed, but the window was covered, too. The light could have been on or off. It didn't matter because there was a handwritten sign that said, *I AM exhibition and book signing coming soon* plus, in smaller writing, *Out, out, brief candle!*

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and is then heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. She rolled her eyes. Even on this sign, he had taken something that didn't belong to him. He had had help from the bard. Mia tapped on the window anyway. She rattled the metal door and kicked at the locked opening. She called Mr. E for the first time in weeks. He usually picked up right away when she returned from assignments, like he had been waiting there for her to get back and report, so she did not have to listen to those dreadful robotic riddles. But here they were again.

Mr. E was not answering. There were only riddles upon riddles and no more breadcrumbs or red dots or ducks for Mia to follow. She was scared to open the book again, to see what it actually contained inside. The cover was transparent, though, so there really was no possibility of avoidance. She kept the bundle of pages rolled up and face down under her arm so she did not see the letters, nor could anyone else around her. She hurried back to her room.

“We have to look, Page.” She said after catching her breath. She opened the book, which began with an epigraph that she did not understand because she had not read the book that the quote had been pulled from. She had hastily skimmed the first page. The letters of her name appeared. She felt disconnected from that person who existed on the page. She was not her. This was not the truth. Thoughts and words had been put into her head that were never originally there. They were too simple and too confusing and would not allow for her to exist as a person. There was no end. She would have to find him before he got to her.



She was going to escape. Just for the weekend. After that, she could reevaluate if it were time to move on for good. That would be the sensible thing to do, to get away from the claustrophobic people and the crowds, which she had run to in the first place for anonymity. Now she was running into the same people too frequently here. There was the neighbor across the hall running to work. There was the dog who wore blue snow booties. The postman who only delivered packages. The gray-haired lady who screamed at park benches. The same three skateboarders who had been falling off their boards since the summer. The man who she suspected was the screaming Thursday storyteller.

She took the train to Grand Central Station. The constellations were drawn on a turquoise background on the ceiling. Mia had to look up. She found her astrological sign. Then she found the baby's. "Here, Little Star, Constellation, Dreamer, those are your stars up there." She pointed at the lion.

The clock with the opal faces kept time. The center of the train station was romantic, old fashioned, like the kind that you see in paintings when steam engines were new and everything

was just starting to be made with steel and glass. Mia could imagine the candlelit chandeliers instead of gas lamps and then electricity. It was the grandest intersection. The sight of the dark subway tunnels, the rusty tracks, the sweaty crowds were buried far down beneath this sight, a stark contrast to the elegance of the upscale shops down the well-lit hallways and golden doorknobs. There were hundreds of people reuniting, returning, coming, going, leaving, disappearing, sometimes all at the same time. This is where lives reconnected and disconnected. This was the place of origin for so many.

It had been Mia's point of origin. Not Grand Central Station, but the train station in Suzhou. She had been left and then found on a bench near the tracks. It was common for babies to be left in public spaces. The one-child policy valued boys, who could later take care of their parents, so girls were sent away, and China was left with a population imbalance. Mia tried picture squirming babies left everywhere, like they were dolls forgotten on the playground. It was like the stork truly existed, and she had been left in a bundle and delivered to her parents shortly after. She wondered if all the babies were silent when they had been left, like they knew that their one responsibility was to keep that family secret. Her China cousins had been left in similar places—in train stations, in front of town halls, at the doorsteps of fire departments.

She wondered what her biological parents had pictured for her now. Her parents had taken a picture of her railroad track with the red lights that flashed outside the station. She had been found there and then brought to the safety of the orphanage. It had been in her file and that is how she knew. She did not remember any of that. "Wanderer, I could never do it. I could never leave you here." Mia was grateful that she had been found, of course, and by luck and chance, she had been matched with her parents and brought home, seven thousand miles away.

She had been born in the wrong country and the wrong time, but she could not imagine things turning out those hundreds of other ways.

She was altering that path through every choice she was making now, while still feeling like none of her actions were entirely consequential. She thought she could run away again and have a new start. She could go upstate to get away from the city sounds and people and Mr. E. She could stay up there for a few days. The whole thing with Mr. E sounded unbelievable as Mia ran through what exactly she was going to do as she checked the schedule on the time board and paid for her Metro-North ticket. She would take the train as far north as it went, all the way to Poughkeepsie.

She walked down the platform, weary and jittery at the same time. “Am I being ridiculous?” she asked her daughter as they boarded the train and took a seat next to a window. The muffled announcement warned that this was the last call for the 2:15 train. “I am. This is crazy. I shouldn’t be doing this. I can’t keep hiding.” Mia pulled out the hastily bound book with the clear cover and flipped through a few pages of her life, the projections of herself from the past part of the year. “This isn’t me.”

The train left, and she was standing on the platform, book in hand, and the determination to do something about all of this. On her way out of Grand Central, Mia spotted a book kiosk. She wondered if her story could end up in the hands of others everywhere.

Mia left the station on foot, back out into the slush. “Get out of my head, get out of my head,” Mia said through gritted teeth as she tried to crush the book in her grip. She was going to find Mr. E. She would bang on doors, show up at his window again, and wreck each clue until she found out what the deal was. Her frustration and desperation for explanations gave her a burst of energy to propel herself across the width of the island and back downtown.

She was out of breath and her head was not any clearer as she made her way towards the High Line. She sped through the crowds, ducking between groups of people that were moving too slowly; over stroller wheels; elbowing through scaffoldings; weaving between parked cars to jog in the narrow bike lane. Her daughter jostled awake. Her pacing had left her out of steam. The avenues were long. She was not a shadow. She disturbed the other pedestrians. Dogs barked at her as she flew by and birds flocked away until they were dots in the sky.

She was gasping for air by the time she reached the stairs of the High Line. She looked at nothing. The invisible house was there like it was the sky. She went to the little window. It was dark inside, but a flash of movement caught her eye. A pair of binoculars was looking out and she was looking back.

She reached down to grab a handful of stones off the repurposed railroad track. She lobbed a gray one at the window. The set of eyes disappeared, but Mia could still see their outline leftover in the window's reflection. She tossed another rock. It only made a tap before falling straight down. Then she began hurling stones one after another at the invisible house. The mirror shimmied. A few tourists turn to look at the girl throwing rocks in arcs that crashed down the shiny surface. It was there. It was solid. And then the wall began to crack, in small fractures at first. It was like a thin ice pond giving way to the dark abyss of water below.

The wall broke. It shattered into a million little pieces. It was beautiful, the rain of glass. It scratched the resilient bark of the trees and scattered into the grasses. Mr. E was not there. He was not behind it. There was nothing. He was not anywhere and nothing was everywhere. In the shards, she saw the world upside down. Boots and zippers. Snagged sweaters peeking out from coats. The dirty undersides of handbags. Everyone she had met was Mr. E—Lori, Constance,

Ray. They were all pieces of the story. He was everywhere because he was everyone and nowhere because he could not exist.



NOW WHERE DOES THAT LEAVE US? THE WALL IS BROKEN AND EVERYTHING IS EXPOSED. THE STRUCTURE OF THE HOUSE IS OPEN FOR VIEWING. THE CRUMBLING RED BRICKS AND BEAMS ARE VISIBLE AND EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE THAT HAD BEEN INVISIBLE TO THE OUTSIDE IS NOW OUT IN THE OPEN. YOU, TOO, ARE EXPOSED OVER AND OVER IN THOSE MILLION PIECES OF GLASS, FROM ALL ANGLES AS YOU WALK AWAY, AS YOU REACH THE END OF THIS STORY, REFRACTED. YOUR EYES ARE TAKING IN THESE LAST CONSTRUCTED SENTENCES. SOON YOU WILL TURN THE PAGE AND CLOSE THE BOOK AND PLACE IT BACK ON THE SHELF OR ON A TABLE TO USE AS A COASTER.

THE END WILL HAVE TO WAIT, THOUGH. I CAN'T SEEM TO BRING EVERYTHING TO AN ABRUPT HALT. IF I LEAVE THE REST OF THE PAGE WHITE AFTER THE FINAL PERIOD YOU WILL BE LEFT WITH SOMETHING PURE AND PERFECT, UNLIKE EVERYTHING THAT YOU HAVE SEEN AND EXPERIENCED. BUT LIFE WILL STILL CONTINUE. YOURS WILL GO ON AND THEN YOU WILL EXIST OFF THE PAGE ONCE AGAIN, BUT ONLY AFTER YOU HAVE MARKED IT AND IT HAS MARKED YOU. BUT BEFORE YOU GO, THERE IS ONE MORE THING THAT I RECORDED FOR THE MUSEUM.



The last assignment came as a surprise. Mia thought she was finished because the Museum should have been set to open, all the artifacts and notes ready to be viewed by the public. Mia did not know what Mr. E's plans were anymore, as he was unreachable, more than ever before. She was readying herself for her next move. She had given Mr. E most of her nighttime paintings, but she still had enough of the stiff, wavy pictures littered throughout the

apartment to clean up. She gathered them up and placed them in a folder. Soon enough, it would truly be like she had not been here at all. She had made sure that she was ready to flee at a moment's notice, just in case Sadie's grandmother wanted to return early or if she ran into serious trouble. There was not much for her to pack.

"Baby bird, it's time to fly away," Mia said. "It's time to lea—" Her eyes locked on her daughter's face for a moment. The baby followed her mother's gaze. "Leah." The name lifted into the air and her daughter caught it. "It's time to leave."

Mia finished strapped her daughter up for a final walk around the city that had been a temporary refuge from reality. It had served as a waiting area while she sorted things out. It had been the most distracting and chaotic waiting room in existence. Maybe distraction was what she had needed, though. The quiet calm of upstate would not have done her any good if she had actually run away. The white walls of wherever she would have chosen to stay would have been too empty, too plain, and too quiet after the city. She needed the screaming energy from the outside to balance her constant state of internal commotion. She had to let her own voice rise above the roar of the crowd and follow where it resounded.

In regards to what she was waiting for, that was a question she was tired of asking herself. The answers were impossible, ranging from normalcy and the return of reality to a sign that she was still on the right path. She had grown tired of waiting. She shifted from foot to foot at a crosswalk, impatient for the light to change.

They saw the park and the trumpet player and the man who rolled his grand piano in on a rope every morning. They saw the sandwich shops and rows of gerbera daisies in buckets outside on sale. Then Mia saw a paper posted on the back of a crooked sign. It was a yield sign that had

been blown sideways and unhinged. The sheet was one of her crumpled advertisements for the Museum of L'origine's reopening. Mia snatched it.

The January date of reopening had been scratched out and replaced with December. She would be gone by then. She had already experienced the Museum for herself. It was somehow contained and wedged between these four corners, the solid walls with the clear cover to see in. It was transportable for her, as she left the objects behind to take away the memories of the experiences.

On the back, there was a note. It had a solid sounding address that was oddly familiar that would lead to her next destination. There was also a list of names from different eras that Mia knew well. Would Mr. E meet her there? He might be in the crowd on the steps or maybe in the ticket line. Maybe he was hiding in the coat check digging through Mia's diaper bag. It didn't matter if she did not find him. He was everywhere she looked. Mia wore the 'M' on her chest. She had finally made it to the Met.

There was the whole world in those gilded frames and behind the glass. The black and white exhibit labels that bore the names of the artists were silent. Those people in the portraits looked back at her. The flowers were for her. The water lilies. The rearing horses. The attentive foot soldiers. This was half of her world. The other half, she carried on her back. She looked down at the part of herself that she had created to contribute to the world. She was like Mr. E, too.

“Let's start again, Leah. Let's go home.”

Let's go home.

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The images for the chapter breaks are altered photographs of tattoos, clipart, stamps, wire art, and prints.

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