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Babylon Off Sunset

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Babylon Off Sunset

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

by

Ella Alexander

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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BABYLON OFF SUNSET

Ella Alexander

Thank you to Mary Caponegro, my wonderful and very patient advisor

Death began in the name, *Los Angeles*, The Angels, horns blaring, judgement at hand, it began in the name and seeped out into the land: smog, sun-bleached streets, delirious dry heat-- rarely a bully but never a friend--a dizzy, faded purgatory. Sometimes in LA, I'd forget for weeks at a time that I was even alive at all.

And then Orrie would do something like cut into my hip with his Boy Scouts pocket knife and poke a finger into the wound. Nothing like pain to remind you that you're not yet dead. To Orrie's credit, he did ask first. He said he'd read online that the top twenty layers of a person's skin are dead, that I was a glowing force of life trapped in a suffocating cellophane wrapper of death, and he wanted to really touch me, the living me.

One good thing about being with somebody who stabs you with a Boy Scouts pocket knife for the purpose of his own metaphor is that you can treat him however you want and not feel very guilty. Nobody cares if you die, I'd tell him. Go eat glass. Play hopscotch on the train tracks. Russian roulette with a fully reloaded revolver, you lose the element of surprise but it's very efficient-- How long would it take to hit the ground if you fell from the rooftop garden? Want to test it out for me? And he'd say, Oh, I just want to be held. And I'd reply, Find a straight jacket because I won't touch you. But of course it was just a game. Orrie was already dead.

Anyways, it's not as horrible as it sounds. Just complicated. And I don't expect you to believe me. Think whatever you want. But keep in mind that if I were a liar, wouldn't I make myself look better?

CHAPTER ONE

The City really did make me want to kill myself--all those forty-floor buildings with rooftop access, the subways--too much temptation. This was one of the factors involved with the decision to ship me off to go live with my uncle in Los Angeles the summer after I graduated high school, the three other factors being that I had no direction in life and I wouldn't take steps to help myself and my mother couldn't take my moods any longer.

Max had given us money over the years, but I hadn't seen him since I was nine. I read about him last year in a Rolling Stone profile entitled "Max MacNamara: Twisted Visions" and of course I'd heard stories. As a kid, he'd been expelled from two different prep schools, once for performing a stage adaptation of *Justine* by the Marquis de Sade in the freshman talent show, and once for biting. He was also later expelled from NYU for dealing coke but he graduated USC Film School with honors, connections and opportunities.

Uncle Max greeted me at baggage claim, wiry and nervous with a face like my father's. This first meeting was awkward, like all meetings between geographically distant and semi-estranged family members who suddenly have to pretend to love each other, but the awkwardness was unavoidable, and in being unavoidable became bearable.

I'd lived in New York my entire life so I wasn't easy to amaze, but the freeway looked dystopian. Four lanes in each direction for miles and miles, circling in on itself like a snake eating its tail, and cars lined up three feet apart running its whole length--I'd seen them from the air and they gave me a slightly unclean feeling, like you'd get when you saw a line of ants marching through a kitchen. The rest of LA didn't match the grand horror of its freeway system:

after a half-hearted attempt at a downtown, the buildings all turned squat and beige, faded through a sepia filter of smog as if we'd wandered the past, and not even the real past, a saccharine idea of a memory of an idea of a past that never even happened in the first place. Palm trees, strangest of all trees, chartreuse octopi skewered on sticks, had been stuck indiscriminately throughout the sea of beige. Somebody told me once that H.G. Wells visited LA and the palm trees inspired him to write *War of the Worlds*. That's not actually true--I looked it up--but it should be. As we skirted around the Valley ("Too hot for God and too dull for the Devil," he told me.) and we drove up through hills to Hollywood, Uncle Max tried to relate to me, and unfortunately succeeded.

"So you want to work in the movies?"

"I mean, I'm not really sure."

"Well, that's why you're here then. To figure that out."

"I'm pretty sure I'm here because my mom doesn't want to deal with me anymore and I'm old enough that she can pawn me off for the summer."

"Laura doesn't want to deal with me either, so we've got that in common."

"She told me you'd be a bad influence on Aaron but for me you wouldn't make any difference at this point."

Max smiled and placed his hand on his heart. *Who, me? A bad influence?* "Aaron's the little guy?"

"I mean, he's fourteen now."

"And you?"

"Seventeen."

"I hated being seventeen."

“Yeah it’s not great.”

“When I was seventeen I think I just wanted to die.”

“Same.”

“That doesn’t go away.”

“Didn’t expect it to.”

“My girlfriend just broke up with me.” said Max.

I remembered this girlfriend clinging to him in the photo spread for “Twisted Visions,” a six-foot tall Argentinian supermodel who stared into the camera with a look that said, ‘ I could snap each of your fingers one by one without blinking.’ “Why’d she leave you?”

“Isolina was... she just couldn’t adapt to my lifestyle.” This meant he’d cheated on her.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s been pretty hard. It’s been...I mean, I just want somebody who understands me, you know?”

“I don’t really think people *can* understand each other.”

He sighed and slumped his shoulders, very vaudeville. “Cigarette?”

We smoked in silence with the windows rolled down then tossed the smoldering stubs onto the road. I liked how I looked smoking cigarettes but I’d never bought a pack for myself. It just seemed like so much effort to addict myself to nicotine. When Uncle Max offered me seconds though, I accepted.

“It’ll be good to have someone around the house again. I’m always alone or with horrible people. And you can help with parties and so on.”

“I’m not sure if I’m good at parties.”

“Just act like you’re better than everyone and they’ll love you.”

“I’m excited to see it. The house, I mean.” The house was not, strictly speaking, really a house, and it was the only reason I’d agreed to be shipped off.

“It’s haunted, you know.”

“How so?”

“Things will go missing. Or get moved around. The furniture will all be moved an inch to the left in the morning sometimes.”

“The Manson Family used to do that. They’d break into houses and alter them slightly, move all the furniture six inches to the left or something, then leave. It was Charlie’s way of easing the Family into the mindset to kill. So I mean, it’s not necessarily supernatural.”

“No, trust me. You feel a presence in the house.”

This second cigarette had me feeling sick. “I don’t know, you could just be losing things out of absent mindedness, Uncle Max--”

“Just Max. ‘Uncle Max’ creeps me out.”

“True, ‘Uncle’ sounds sinister, but don’t you think it could just be an *emotional* presence? Like the ghost of your dead relationship haunting you or something?”

“Everyone feels it. Isolina said she heard a voice in the night once, back when she was around. Isolina hated Babylon.”

“What did it say? The voice.”

“It’s ruined.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not a malevolent presence, necessarily.”

Max lived in a renovated 1940s movie set of Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon palace. After the movie it was built for, director Oren Northern Oberon's celebrated 1948 epic *The Book of Daniel*, was finished, nobody knew what to do with the set. They left it standing in the hills for a few months, but the city started slamming the studio with fines, calling it an eye sore and a fire hazard, so they dismantled it and buried it in the desert, where it remained for sixty years until Max heard about it, and used his money from an awful action movie franchise to excavate. He'd always been planning to film a movie in it, a remake of *The Book of Daniel*, but the preproduction stage lagged so much that he'd taken to just living in the upstairs of the palace, and hosting parties in the lower half. He even had air-conditioning installed. They were shooting this summer, finally, after eight years of bureaucratic entanglement, but he'd grown too used to Babylon to think of moving out.

The exterior of the house was done up in deep blue tiles lacquered to shine like lapis lazuli, inlaid with mosaic lions and dragons and bulls, each with its own unique face. Two towers flanked the building, decorated with twin groves of tall turquoise palms. Max said the towers were just for display though; you couldn't access them from the inside.

I'd seen pictures of it online but I pretended I hadn't, just to give him the effect he wanted. Besides, unlike every other hyped object I'd seen in my life, including Max himself, the palace was actually bigger than I'd expected--it seemed to lean forward, to loom over us, glittering like a tsunami against the sun.

"I'll give you the grand tour."

The ground floor was designed like you'd expect from a Hollywood Babylon palace—lots of gold leaf and anachronistic Greek columns and frescoes and jewel toned plush furniture. Most of this was new, but replicated exactly to look like the original. There was a large, mostly

empty room with patterned tile floors and steps leading up to a great gold chair, the throne room in *The Book of Daniel*. Now Max threw his parties there.

I felt watched, and said so.

“Now you see what I mean about the haunting?”

Off to the side was the kitchen, white with matte chrome accents, a hundred unused mystery appliances, and only a jar of peanut butter and some sour milk in the fridge.

“This used to be the dungeon.”

“Damn, why’d you get rid of the dungeon?”

“It’s a big regret. Isolina didn’t like it.”

The gilded central staircase led up, improbably, to a sedate arrangement of three bedrooms and two bathrooms with warm lighting and beige carpets.

“I just wanted this part as a normal house, you know, so as not to get overwhelmed,” Max explained.

Something about him, maybe some natural sense of familial connection, made me feel comfortable being slightly mean to him. “It looks like a SitCom house.”

“I just had my people put it together.” He shrugged. “It’s homey.”

My room, formerly a guest room, had lavender walls and dove grey furniture. We dragged up my ancient black suitcase, and it looked like an aggressive, territorial zoo gorilla had escaped and broken into Martha Stewart’s house. Before leaving me in the lavender nightmare Max said, offhandedly, “I’m going to dinner with some producers to talk about the next project. So it’s kind of a work thing, but you can come if you want.”

I knew I wasn’t supposed to accept this offer, but I didn’t get to eat out much in New York and besides, I didn’t want to be in that house alone. “Thanks, I’d love to.”

“It’s a nice place so maybe change from blue jeans to dark wash.”

I put on a skirt and stood out as the most overdressed person on the candle-lit veranda where we were seated, except for the producers, two well-groomed white guys named Paul and Alex, who wore suits and leather shoes. Max had jeans on, dark wash.

“Oh,” said Paul, or maybe Alex, “who’s this?” He kissed the air near each of my cheeks like we were in Europe.

“This is my *niece*, Mia.”

They spent the rest of the dinner talking shit about mutual acquaintances, referring to them by their first names, but only after making sure I knew they were talking about people I was supposed to have heard of. Two bottles of champagne, expensive enough that nobody bothered to card me, were ordered to celebrate ‘the project’, which, after years in limbo, once greenlit and cancelled, was finally about to become a reality. After ninety minutes of bullshit, I got a text from Max:

Say you’re tired so we can leave

I finished my fourth glass of champagne in one gulp, which wasn’t suspicious because nobody was paying any attention, then stretched my arms out theatrically. “You must be jet-lagged,” Max said, before I could make anything up myself. I nodded.

Dizzy, I let my head rest against the window of Max’s Italian car as he drove me back to Babylon. He’d had more to drink than I had, and I remembered I was supposed to care about my own personal safety and the wellbeing of my fellow citizens, to tell him to call an Uber and pick

the car up in the morning, but I just buckled my seatbelt and hoped for the best. He drove fast down canyon roads illuminated only by LA's eerie light pollution, and didn't turn on the radio.

"I don't even know what your project's about." I said.

He sighed. "It's a remake of *The Book of Daniel*. The plot's sort of--I have a headache. I can tell you about it later."

"How was that a work thing?"

Later I learned that all the real work pre-production got done in asbestos-stuffed office buildings in Encino and those dinners were just excuses to drink wine, plus Hollywood people, never having any actual friends, were forced to scratch social lives out of dinner meetings and Chateau Marmont after-parties they claimed to hate, but that night driving down Topanga, Max didn't even bother to answer me. I fell asleep listening to the car hit the canyon winds.

CHAPTER TWO

I thought I'd go to bed when we got back but Max wanted a nightcap and he didn't want to drink it alone. He talked about the existential implications of his breakups for an hour and a half, pouring us drinks at regular intervals, then let me stumble back to bed dehydrated. The room looked altered, somehow, but it might have been the darkness or my own spinning vodka vision, and I hadn't paid enough attention to its composition in the first place to say definitively whether or not anything had been changed.

I dreamt of the Manson family and wandered back into consciousness the next morning hungover and alone. Max had gone off somewhere without leaving a note, and I didn't want to look needy by texting him so I went through his medicine cabinet instead.

I'd gotten into the habit of surveying pill collections in New York. My place never had anything good except after Aaron got his wisdom teeth out and refused to take his Codeine, but some of my friends' moms were well-stocked, and if they ever noticed a missing Xanax here or there--I'd only take a pill or two, never a whole bottle--they never traced it back to me.

Joy at the contents of Max's medicine cabinet overpowered any guilt I might have felt over taking advantage of my uncle's hospitality. An overflowing bounty of pills, a prescription cornucopia: OxyContin, Ativan, Percocet, Klonopin, Vicodin, Ambien, Norco, Xanax, and something suspicious in a tinted vial, unlabelled. Plenty more too, uppers that didn't interest me much and other pills I'd never even heard of. What was Hydromorphone? Why did Max have three bottles of it?

Over the next couple of weeks, with Max always away, I established a routine. In the morning I'd take pills, Codeine or Ambien or Norco, try to scratch off my skin because the layer underneath the surface itched, then fall off into bright, prickling dreams, which I'd try to write down as soon as I woke up. It was sort of a scientific experiment, to see what effects different chemicals had on my unconscious psyche, although I probably should have been more consistent in the conditions of the experiment, if I wanted accurate results.

On the beach, Rockaway beach, I weaved through a crowd of glistening lump-like bodies packed so close together you could barely see the sand, wincing away each time I brushed up

against sticky skin, chasing a man with no face. He pushed his way down to the water, then ran along the shoreline. I was about to run after him when I noticed his face in the waves. The dream gave me no instructions: Should I chase the man, or the face? And as I stood there, trying to decide, both escaped me.

(Codeine, 30 mg)

I was put in charge of a rare, delicate flower sent from far away; I had to keep it from wilting. It wanted to die, but grew well on human skin, so I planted it on my shoulder. When the plant was healthy again, I tried to pull it out. The roots had dug in too deep, splitting muscle, dodging bone, grabbing for my heart.

(Ambien, 10 mg)

Something was wrong inside of me. My organs had all fused together into one crude mass. The weight of it fell downwards, leaving empty the cavity of my chest. I lay on my back, naked in the dirt, trying to feel out the distinctions between what used to be lung and stomach through my skin, then felt the super-organ push back, agitated. A man with wild hair crouched beside me. He whispered, *Don't worry, darling.*

(Dilaudid, 8 mg)

In the afternoons I'd sunbathe on the roof and read the New Yorker, or watch old episodes of *Friends* in my bed. Sometimes my friends back home would text, asking what I was doing, but I wasn't actually doing anything, so I'd never respond. Eventually I sent a out mass Snapchat picture of the mosaic lions. My friend Nina sent back: **Who is that guy?**

Where?

Behind you. In the reflection.

The picture had expired so I couldn't retrieve it but Nina always liked to fuck with me so I told her: **The Ghost**.

At night, Max and I would work on a bottle of vodka in the chrome kitchen and he'd give me updates on *The Book of Daniel*. He had grand ambitions for it, and so spoke in contradictions: it would be a testament to a universal experience; only a few would understand it; the scale was epic; the scope was intimate; the emotions were violent, visceral; the atmosphere was contemplative, silent; etcetera; etcetera. Filming began in a week.

Sometimes he'd ask about me, but not ever in ways I could answer. "Are you bored? To be honest, I was really never clear on what you were supposed to be doing here--happy to have you, of course."

"I think the rationale had more to do with what I wasn't supposed to be doing."

"But are you bored?"

"I mean, yeah."

"Well, you know what I've been thinking, you know what might be fun?"

"What?"

"A party. Just a little one. A cast party." His posture changed as he presented this idea; he seemed lighter, curled his mouth with the self-satisfaction of a housecat dropping a bloody sparrow carcass at your feet.

This turned out not to have been a spur-of-the-moment suggestion, but rather an idea Max had come up before I'd even arrived in LA, and waited to tell me about because he was a

director and his sense of deliberate pacing spilled over from art to life. And although he adopted the appearance and demeanor of somebody who never did much of anything, Max really did work all day. He had all the principals cast, all the sets secured, and nothing left to do but plan the cast party. (A cast party really should be held after a film's premiere, but Max had a tradition of throwing two cast parties, one before filming and one afterwards. Generally, he threw as many parties as he had an excuse to throw.)

CHAPTER THREE

The decorators arrived at dawn--a chain gang of grey vans parking all down the driveway. They brought tall glass-top tables, the awkward chairless type you're supposed to stand around, and vases full of foxgloves and irises and hydrangeas--poisonous flowers only, Max insisted, based on some strange superstition he'd picked up at film school--and an open bar. Max and I had been up all night talking so he was awake to direct them. After the crew put the flowers in the fridge, which they knew from experience would be empty, I asked one of them if there was any way i could help but she smiled and shook her head, so I went to bed and slept until late afternoon.

The cast party, on top of not really being a cast party, was not really for the cast. Max always made sure to invite a mix of people he thought would be interesting to throw in a room together, not just industry faces but artists and novelists and crazy West Coast money types. He would also throw in what he called 'wild cards'--poor people he met in bars, usually. Thinking it over, I realized I'd misunderstood what he meant by 'cast party.'

The cast began to arrive at ten but, after a very brief expedition into the throne room, I retreated upstairs for an hour to avoid the nervous early arrivals. Better to wait till they were drunk. When I descended again, the party was livelier. Max was draped across the throne, chatting up a thirty-something woman in a silk jumpsuit. He smiled closed-mouth and nodded when he saw me, a gesture I understood to mean I should leave him alone. A waiter was coming around with glasses of champagne--I stared desperately until he notice me, then took two.

I wasn't good at parties. I got nervous, unsure of how to introduce myself, how to chat, how to stand, even, in a way that tricked people into thinking I was both casual and confident. I always ended up in a corner scrolling through Instagram, even at stupid high school parties in the city. I knew I could counteract my natural neurosis with alcohol but I hadn't really figured out how to get the right amount of drunk. One moment you don't feel anything and the next you're stuffing an overwatered cactus into your bag to 'give it a better life' then following some jumpy Stern Business School guy to his apartment and making awkward small talk with his long-suffering roommate while Nina throws up in his bathroom.

I tried again to make eye contact with Max but he didn't even notice me this time. A tall Indian girl wearing a leather jacket with eyes painted all over it came up to me. "I like your dress," she said, unsmiling.

"Thanks, I got it in the trash." This was basically true--NYU had clothing donation bins outside their dorm buildings every May where the rich kids could toss their unwanted mini fridges and clubwear to be donated to the Goodwill, and for years my friends and I had a tradition of rifling through them during the one apathetic security guard's shift.

"Oh yeah, that new place on the Promenade. It's good?"

"No, the trash."

"Trash Apparel at the Promenade."

"Just the regular trash."

"Oh. Why?"

I always made the same mistake with Cool People. I would say something shocking and catch their attention then, when I had it, I'd crumble under the pressure of maintaining it. "Um, I don't know," I said. "It wasn't the trash exactly. But basically the trash, yeah. It's free."

“Why do you need free stuff? You’re Max MacNamara’s niece.”

How did she know that? Was this why she was bothering to talk to me? “Usually I live in New York where I’m not anybody’s anything.”

“But you washed it right?”

“Oh yeah for sure.” Probably. “What’s…” The champagne guy had circled back around, and I grabbed another glass. Or what did Max call it? Flute. “Your name?”

“Riya.”

“I’m Mia.”

“It rhymes.”

“Yeah.” Was I supposed to laugh?” I did, but then felt I’d made a mistake.

“Yeah. Listen Mia, could you do me a favor?”

“What?”

“Could you introduce me?”

“What?”

“To your uncle.”

“How?”

“Just be like, ‘Hey, I want you to meet my friend Riya; she’s an actress.’”

“Okay.”

“Great!” She put her arm around my waist and led me to the throne, smiling. Max was talking to another woman now, whom I recognized from the headshots Max had shown me as the actress playing Susannah. Susannah, whose real name was Lucia Francesca Gaunt, wasn’t a movie star yet. Max had discovered her. There was a certain rush, he’d told me one night, in plucking a person out of obscurity. Looking at Lucia though, there was nothing obscure about

her. Big, bright black eyes and big bright black hair, a straight, regal sort of nose and a mouth like a strawberry sliced in half. Simply, classically, inevitably beautiful, she seemed like she'd been born famous, the daughter of a sheik and an Italian supermodel, maybe. She smiled and I couldn't tell if she was looking at me or Riya. That's a certain type of obscure, I guess.

"I like your dress." said Riya. The dress was modest in cut, a long-sleeved, high-necked silhouette hemmed at the calves--but the skin-tight black mesh it was made of, sheer except for an opaque band at the breasts and another at the hips, turned the dress into a sort of ironic commentary on modesty. I wanted to tell her this but decided against it, worried she would think I was calling her a slut.

"This is my friend Riya" I said instead. "She's an actress."

Lucia shook our hands, smiling again with the placid composure of a person used to being watched. She made eye contact as she did this and I felt a brief surge of connection with her, followed by an aftershock of embarrassment at having really thought I'd felt a mutual connection with a person whose job it was to draw other people in. I tried for a moment to think of something to say, then excused myself to the bathroom, figuring I could contribute something later to whatever topic everyone else did the work of thinking up while I was gone. In the bathroom I texted Nina:

Somehow you think fancy people should be interesting but they're not.

As I washed my hands, I noticed that somebody had left a credit card with the name CHRISTOPHER J. VALLENCOURT on top of the Rumi book by the toilet. Chris Vallencourt. Max had mentioned him before, but I couldn't remember the context.

When I got back, Max was talking to Riya and Lucia about The Creative Process, which he did whenever nobody had anything better to talk about. “Hey Max,” I said. “Who’s Chris Vallencourt?”

“Chris? He’s the son of my producer. Well, he’s my producer too. Junior producer.”

“I’ve never been able to tell what a producer really *does*.” said Riya.

“Money.”

“Anyways, he left his credit card in the bathroom.”

“It’s good you found it,” said Lucia, “and not somebody else.”

“Why? I could be a thieving drug addict or something. You don’t know.”

Lucia laughed lightly then looked to Max to confirm that I was joking, and I knew I was finally drunk enough for this party.

“You never know. People can be sketchy, even in nice places.” said Riya.

“*Especially* in nice places,” said Lucia.

“Let’s find Chris,” said Lucia. Everyone agreed that was the thing to do. Max suggested we split into teams and search the house. He said it would have to be him and Riya as one team and Lucia and me as the other, since only he and Lucia knew what Chris looked like, and that we should start by checking all the dark corners and rooms he wasn’t allowed in.

“You have his number though?” said Lucia.

“Oh, right.” And so Max texted Chris and we were left with the burden of thinking up another topic of conversation.

“So, who’s here?” Asked Riya.

“My usual people,” Max began listing off names and Riya nodded seriously with each one. I looked to Lucia but she was texting. A hand came down on my shoulder and a laugh shot out from behind me. “You have my card?”

I turned around. A man, about thirty, tallish, darkish, drunkish, staring down at me from under sculpted eyebrows.

“Christopher J. Vallencourt?” I asked.

“The very same.”

“Chris,” Max called out, as I fished for the credit card in my purse, “This is my niece Mia, and you know Lucia.”

“Max! I want to tell you this movie’s gonna be big. I was just talking to Jack and he says this is gonna be seminal. Senimal? Seminal. What do you think about an Oscar?”

They hugged to show the girls how confident they were in their heterosexuality.

“I’m Riya,” said Riya.

Chris laughed overloud and patted her too low on the back. Everyone seemed relieved to have Chris as a conversational defibrillator. He turned back to me and held out his hand, with the mock-imperious air of a mafia boss collecting money owed. “Make any important purchases in our bathroom?” I asked.

He laughed his cannonball laugh. “If a man takes out his credit card in the bathroom, it’s not because he needs to make any important purchases.”

I tried to lock eyes with Max, with whom I’d talked at length about my hatred of Joke Appropriation--when a person is too stupid to understand that you’re joking and then proceeds to steal the credit by pointing out what he perceives to be your misconception--but Max, looking at Chris, just laughed.

“Christopher J. Vallencourt is a really bourgeois name.”

“It’s bourgeois to call people bourgeois, Mia.” Max said. “Anyways, Chris, how was Aspen?”

“Like always. You know. But then on the way home from the airport I got stuck in a three-hour traffic jam and it was like, ‘Welcome the fuck home.’”

Unlike New Yorkers, Angelenos--who would never actually call themselves anything as brazenly uncool as ‘Angelenos’--took pride in hating their city. In New York people loved their subway rats and trash-filled streets, told each other with only a little irony that they were living in the greatest city on Earth. In LA they mostly just complained about the ravenous maw of the paparazzi and a construction detour on the 405. I used to think the sun made Californians stupid and happy, but really they’d just transcended East Coast ennui, taking nihilism for a law more self-evident than gravity then filling up their pointless time with Wednesday-morning yoga and Friday-night cocaine which, soon after he’d finished summarizing Aspen, Chris offered with raised eyebrows and a tilted chin.

We used the upstairs bathroom, where we wouldn’t be bothered. Huddled excitedly around the marble counter with Riya, Max, and Chris--Lucia had demurred simply and sweetly, saying coke gave her a headache--I wondered vaguely about how ethical this cocaine was, having recently read an article about Colombia’s ongoing struggle with Pablo Escobar’s legacy of violence and corruption, and also how sanitary this credit card was, having recently found it abandoned in a different bathroom, but I kept my mouth shut. I’d never done cocaine before, and I was curious. Chris chopped and divided the powder with an expert’s precision while Riya told Max she’d been a huge fan of his movies, “ever since I was a kid.” A mixture of emotions played

across his face when he heard this statement, but he thanked her and put his arm around her shoulder. Chris handed his rolled up twenty to Riya first. She gave the bill back to him after she'd finished, but he put it in my hand. Chivalry: alive and well in the bathrooms of Los Angeles.

“Have you ever done this before?” he asked.

I shook my head and he grinned with satisfaction, announcing, “We’ve got a virgin!”

I did as Chris instructed then whipped my head up in shock, surprised at how quickly the rush hit me. I rubbed my nose and said, “Wow!” which everyone agreed was adorable.

“How can it be burning and numb at the same time?” I asked Max as he snorted the second of two consecutive lines.

He whipped his head up, looked me in the eyes, and said, “Mia, you’re a really special person. I want you to know that.”

My heart was banging against my ribs and my brain was falling in on itself and I looked back at Max and felt a rush of manic love and hugged him. “You’re a real artist,” I said into his shirt, “and the only person who understands me.”

“God, kid, that means so much coming from you. It really does. You know I thought I hated my entire family before you came to stay with me? I never got along with Jeff like this growing up and Laura, *God*, Laura hated me from the start. Your mom’s a real bitch, no offense.”

“No it’s okay, I know,” I said. In truth, I loved my mom, and understood how much of a strain I put on her with all the shit I pulled, and tried not to blame her at all, because she was a good person and she tried her best, but my head was tingling with a sense of infinite possibilities

stretching out in front of me, and although I couldn't say what exactly these possibilities were, I knew they came from Max, and so I didn't hesitate to betray my mother.

"You can't call her mom a bitch, Max! Jesus!" Chris said. "Even if it's true!"

"You're not so bad," I told Chris, laughing. He actually was so bad, but now I didn't care.

"Not so bad!"

The crash of metal hitting wood sounded from outside. "What's that?" asked Riya.

"The ghost," I replied, having gotten into the habit of blaming every midnight mystery creak on 'the ghost.'

"You know, I did sense a presence in this house."

"Right? Everyone does."

"Sorry," a giggly boy called out from the hall. "We got lost."

"Yeah, sorry!" shouted an equally giggly girl. We heard Max's bedroom door slam shut.

"They're in my bedroom! *My* bedroom." Said Max, banging his fist on the counter. I looked to see if he was actually angry, and he was. "Who are these assholes? That's some fucking disrespect."

"That's fucked up," said Chris, neck twitching.

"I know a woman who does energy cleansings for houses. Sage ceremonies and stuff? I can call her if you want." Riya got out her phone.

"Right now?" I asked.

"Oh yeah no, I guess probably not."

"It is fucked up, isn't it?" Max pushed past us, leaving the bathroom door wide open as he went off to confront the couple. "And they knocked over the fucking lamp!" He yelled from the hall.

Once Max had left, we knew we couldn't stay in the bathroom anymore. Our safe, well-lit womb was ruptured by the noise of the party below and all the excited energy seemed to flood out the open door and down the stairs. "I want to dance!" said Riya.

"Yes! Dancing!" I didn't really want to dance, but the bathroom was ruined and I needed to get out.

I danced with Chris and Riya for a while but their bright, gaudy faces, deformed by my inebriated vision and their own excitement, made me nervous, and Chris kept touching my waist so I slipped away without bothering to think up an excuse, and walked out to the front door to feel the cool, dry air on my skin. A few strangers stood around smoking and one guy was pacing diagonally across the lawn yelling into his phone, "You're killing me, Natasha! Can't you see you're killing me?" For the most part though, the crowd had been drawn back inside by the late arrival of the locally famous DJ.

I stood hidden in the shadow of the great arch anyways, on the off chance that anybody might try to interact with me. Still hoppy from the coke, I felt suddenly very dirty. Dirty for not standing up for my mother when Max called her a bitch, for taking drugs offered by a person I viscerally disliked and for letting him touch me and telling him he was "not so bad." As a kid, framing my life like a story, I had always just assumed I was good. The hero is *always* good. But faced with a fancy party full of strangers, how easily my integrity fell away. He called my mom a bitch and I just *laughed*. If people could be intrinsically good, I wasn't one of them.

I stood there for ten minutes, maybe more, thinking about my own moral weakness and social awkwardness and jumpy comedown muscles--how long had it been? The pacer eventually gave up on Natasha and went in to witness the DJ, and the smokers cleared out to hit another

party, leaving me alone outside Babylon, I thought, until a voice poured out like cold water in a perfect arc of inflection to ask, “Cigarette?”

The man now standing beside me had the sort of profile you’d see on a Roman coin, equal parts dignified and feral: philosopher’s brow and kingly chin, hawk-like nose and tiger’s eyes. He was young, maybe twenty-five, but stood with a slight stoop in his back, a person who had been beaten down by life, but only just a little bit, in an attractive poetic way. His hair had divided itself into tribes, and was now fighting skirmishes at various locations around his skull, more aggressive than messy. With a grey button down and black pants (not denim), he was the most dressed-up man at the party. “Don’t have any,” I said.

“No, I was asking if you wanted one.” He held out a gold cigarette case, fillagreed and engraved with the initials O N O. The sort of object Oscar Wilde might own. He allowed me to look at this unlikely object for a moment before popping it open.

“Oh no.” I read aloud, plucking a single cigarette.

“You looked lost in thought.” He produced a lighter--vintage, silver, impractically large--and conjured a flame.

I balanced the cigarette in my mouth as I leaned into the fire, then surprised myself by telling the truth. “I was thinking about how hard it is to be a good person.”

He took a long drag of his own cigarette, already half-smoked, “Is that really the most important thing?”

“What else is there?” Now I felt embarrassed, a little bit, like we were playing out the scene of a midnight party ennui conversation rather than really saying anything original, but it was too late to go back.

“Truth.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Beauty.”

What would it mean to live for beauty? I wasn’t nearly sober enough to conduct a conversation on living for beauty so I just asked, “What’s your name?”

“Jacob.” He exhaled and I watched the smoke float up. It shimmered like an oil puddle from certain angles.

“I’ve never seen cigarettes like that before…”

“They’re from Europe.”

“Huh.”

“And your name?”

“Oh, sorry, I’m Mia.” I held out my hand and thought, for a moment, that he was going to kiss it, even though nobody had ever kissed my hand in my entire life, but he just shook it like a normal person, not even pulling that firm grip bullshit people learn from self-help channels on YouTube.

I tried for the hundredth time that night to think of something to say. Nothing came. But then, why was it my responsibility to entertain these people? Why did I have to be interesting? I could just laugh and agree and act surprised on cue. “Do you ever feel obligated to entertain people?” I asked.

“No, but to show them things, maybe?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s my job.”

“Right, you movie people. No, sorry, what I mean is, I feel like whenever there’s a lull in conversation, it’s my fault. It never occurs to me that the other person could be slacking. But now I’m thinking, why?”

Somehow I’d managed to insult him twice in one breath, but he only laughed. “Am I slacking?”

In too deep, better to keep pushing forward now. “Yes. Say something interesting.”

“The moonlight--”

“Oh no, nothing about the moonlight.”

He stubbed out his cigarette on the eye of a tile lion. “What’s wrong with the moonlight?”

“It’s an easy target for lame metaphors.”

“I wasn’t going to give a lame metaphor.”

“Sorry. What then about the moonlight?”

“Well now I don’t know if I should tell you.”

He was smiling. He wanted me to plead for the moonlight metaphor, but I wouldn’t. “You know what’s unfair? You don’t really have to say much to impress. Guys can be *stoic*. If I were so succinct, you’d think I was timid or just stupid.”

“Not true. Women can be *enigmatic*.”

“Enigmatic means no personality.”

“So does stoic.”

I had to laugh, because he was right. “They don’t know what a service we’re performing--the stoics and enigmas. They might as well be furniture, really.”

“And who’s we?”

Feeling bold, “The interesting people.”

“Am I interesting?”

“Yes, I think so. You’ve got that gold cigarette case with O NO written on it--not even your initials. Did you steal it? No judgement, I had a klepto phase too a few years back.”

“An heirloom.”

“Right. Well, I only took from big stores, not people. Anyways I guess objects aren’t a good measure. Riya has an eye-print jacket and she’s not that interesting.”

“Rita?”

“Riya. She’s this girl inside wearing a jacket with eyes painted all over it. She’s not interesting.”

“But you think I am?”

“Are you?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll take it on faith then. I’ve got a sense for these things.”

“Am I supposed to take it on faith that you’re interesting too?”

“No but you have proof considering I’ve been carrying this entire conversation while you do that Socrates thing. Sort of like what I was saying about the stoics, actually.”

“Socrates wasn’t a stoic.”

“But he was a pedant.”

He was smiling still, but had the smile turned stiff? Did I go too far? I hated to be mean, but I was so good at it--unable to find the line between playful banter and genuine insult, unfortunately accurate in my unkind observations. Maybe he’d been called pedantic before, and the comment cut into a scar, ruined his night, made him hate me.

But then, slowly, deliberately, Jacob reached for his jacket pocket, took out a white handkerchief, and unfolded it. “I surrender,” he said, waving it out in front of him, sad flag limp in the still night. I had never met anyone with such a genius for props. I was going to tell him so too, but he spoke first. “Would you like to hear what I was going to say about the moonlight?”

“Mia! There you are.” I looked past Jacob’s shoulder to find Max, leaning out the doorway, holding its frame for balance. “Come inside, I can’t deal with these people on my own.”

“Max, this is Jacob.” He’d told me in the morning never to assume he knew anyone at his own parties. They nodded at each other, men, and when I turned to rejoin the party, Jacob didn’t follow.

“I hate these people. They make me want to die.” said Max, once inside. He had to yell to be heard through the DJ’s noise.

“Then you’ll go to hell, and it’ll be exactly like this party but forever.”

“I will go to hell, won’t I?”

CHAPTER FOUR

On the fourth day of filming, when the crew had, as much as it could, found its rhythm, Max brought me on set to watch. They were working through all the outdoors scenes before they started in on Babylon, which needed to be cleaned and lit up and rearranged before it could host any respectable twenty-first century movie, even one based on the tackiest blockbuster of the 1950s. We drove out to the middle of the desert, a flat tan wasteland varied only by occasional rocks and, heat-warped on the horizon, the tents town Max and his people had set up in a week: trailers for the stars; ID badges for the crew; a black, scalding vat of coffee for the extras, a fleet of frowning assistants running around, a general aura of panic. Max had his own canvas fold-out chair with the word 'DIRECTOR' spray painted on its back. It wasn't very comfortable, but a comfortable chair would not be a director's chair, and he was very attached to traditions and ritual objects.

He and my father had been raised Catholic, and while all Jeff had taken from that ordeal was a persistent worm of guilt that wriggled its way into any moment he found himself enjoying, Max had been imprinted with a certain sense of ceremony. During the filming of every movie he'd ever directed, he woke up at 4:05 and began every day of filming by meditating, hungover, to a set of songs he kept secret even from me. He hid personal possessions on set early in the morning, before the cameramen arrived. Reading glasses, white gold watch, wedding ring from a month-long marriage he'd endured a decade ago. "Life becomes art; art becomes life."

Despite all these auteur trappings, the amount of time he spent lamenting his love-life with vodka in the kitchen-dungeon, and the impression he gave of never doing much of anything,

Max was a ruthlessly efficient manager. He finished filming on time, under budget, and turned a profit on every movie he'd ever made. Critics could call them thoughtful but audiences didn't have to think.

[EXT. DESERT]

[Daniel stands alone in the desert, looking around. He sees only emptiness.]

[Then, on the horizon, a tiny figure can be seen, growing larger. It is the angel Gabriel.]

[Gabriel walks up to Daniel. Neither speak.]

[Gabriel leads Daniel through the eye of a giant mask, sculpted in the image of the king and suddenly laid down in front of them.]

[Through the eye, they now stand at the base of a statue, fifty feet high, with sandals of stone, legs of bronze, a body of silver, and a head of gold.]

[Daniel steps forwards.]

[Gabriel puts a hand on Daniel's chest, warning him to stay back.]

[The sound of a rock hitting the dry dirt. The statue's big toe.]

[Now we see another toe fall off. Slowly the feet crumble, then all at once, the statue collapses, each leg falling backwards with a clang, leaving the body to drop down alone, parting from the head as it lands.]

[The gold head rolls forward until it is just a few feet away from them. Its face is contorted with fear, mouth open in a silent scream.]

[END SCENE]

The actor playing Daniel, Tommy Boswell, was a longtime collaborator of Max's. They weren't friends, exactly, but Tommy liked Max for the prestige he provided, and Max liked Tommy for the generous studio funding he brought to any project he attached his name to. This is what's called mutual respect between artists.

Max brought me to Tommy's trailer at lunch and introduced me. He shook my hand and smiled with well-practiced warmth before holding up a 'one second' finger and returning to a rapid fire text conversation. He didn't bother to introduce himself--we both knew I already knew his name, which, according to Max, Tommy's manager made up twenty years ago to market him as an all-American teen heartthrob. Now, in his mid-forties, Tommy had transitioned into a *serious actor* but the name remained. I thought it was sad that a grown man would be called Tommy for the rest of his life. Tommy on the tombstone, Hollywood Forever. If he'd been allowed to become Thomas, would he be happier?

Frowning into his phone, Tommy clearly had no thoughts about me, so it seemed undignified, subservient, to keep thinking about him, even if he was Tommy Boswell. I turned to Max but he was texting too, in retaliation to the slight. After a terrible minute in which I was trying not to think about or look at the famous person in front of me and, by trying, failing, Tommy put down his phone. "Max, I still don't get the girl."

"Lucia's talented." Max said.

"Is she? Really?"

"You saw her audition tape. That raw emotion. It's there."

"She's stiff."

"She's nervous."

Tommy sighed under the burden of his own genius, and Max shifted his shoulders with the weight of his.

“I guess it’s too late now.” said Tommy.

“Yes.” said Max.

“Nice to meet you,” I lied, meriting no response.

“Fucking actors,” said Max, once we’d escaped Tommy’s trailer. “They get big and then suddenly think they’re qualified to make *decisions*. And actors always think they can write, and they never actually can.”

“To be fair, writers always think anyone could act.”

“But only the most insufferable choose to pursue it.”

“Ah.”

“He just hates Lucia because he needs something to hate. He’s the one who found her, actually--met her at some party and got her an audition. And you know what he was saying to me earlier? He said ‘we should film in sixteen millimeter.’ Why? *Why* should we film in sixteen millimeter? ‘Authenticity.’ Jesus. Nothing worse than an idiot who doesn’t know he’s an idiot.”

I didn’t know how to respond to this so I just nodded. We ate bagels in silence then I slunk away to some distant tent to read one of those Russian ‘everybody dies’ books for the rest of the day. Max came to check on me a couple of times, and I asked a few weak questions when he did. I think he was disappointed that I didn’t take more interest in his work but the truth was, the whole thing just stressed me out: the tense, quiet arguments, Max’s worried pacing, Tommy Boswell glancing over me with the identity-obliterating indifference regular people might hold

for dying grass. Max asked me later if I was bored and I replied that no, it was super interesting for sure but I couldn't help but feel just a little bit like I was getting in the way.

After twenty pages of the aristocratic narrator watching orphans fight for rat meat on the streets on Saint Petersburg, I put down the Russian book to check my phone. A snap from Nina of some stupid party, and nothing else. Back to the book. One of the orphans picks fur and bone from his teeth with a sharpened shank of a fingernail.

I walked over to find Max arguing with Tommy about whether he should prioritize fear or awe in his eyes as he stared into the blank space where they'd later add the CG statue. I returned to my tent.

For a few years now, when I could find nothing else to do, I defaulted to surfing Wikipedia. I've never admitted this to anyone but I don't know why I'm so embarrassed by it-- Wikipedia is the only good thing to come out of the twenty-first century: the Collective Consciousness manifest, a fireproof Library of Alexandria, the Salmon of Infinite Wisdom fished out of Connla's Well by Jesus Christ and divvied up to feed the masses--My starting point today was *The Book of Daniel* (1949).

The Book of Daniel is a 1949 epic drama film written and directed by Oren Northern Oberon. It stars Jett Martins, Abelard Whitsett, Verna Bird, and Yul Brynner. The film is based on the biblical Book of Daniel, with significant departures from its original source material. It follows Daniel's (Martins) displacement from Jerusalem to Babylon, his service to and eventual friendship with King Nebuchadnezzar (Whitsett), whose dreams he interprets with the divine assistance of the angel Gabriel (Brynner), his trial and failed execution in a pit of lions and, after

an emotional confrontation with the king, the destruction of Babylon at the hands of the Persian Empire.

A forerunner of the epic cinema trend of the 1950s and early 1960s, it is notable for having the longest run time (three hours and six minutes) and highest budget of any movie made in the 1940s, and also for its unprecedented box office success. In 1996, the film was selected for preservation in the United States National Film Registry by the Library of Congress as being, "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

From there, I chose the most interesting name:

Abelard Whitsett (June 8, 1911-February 17, 1965), born Gregg Legg in Scranton, Pennsylvania, was an American actor. He is best known for his performance as Nebuchadnezzar II or 'the King' in The Book of Daniel (1949). Whitsett's other notable credits include The Hartford Chorus (1939), O Captain, My Captain! (1944), Say It Ain't So (1952), and the notorious box office failure Kitty and Levin (1957). With his urbane manners and composed bearing, Whitsett was often mistaken for an Englishman. In 1965, he died of liver cirrhosis in Woodland Hills, California.

Kitty and Levin is a 1957 film directed by James McCourt starring Abelard Whitsett and Ava Gardner. Following the moderate success of War and Peace (1956), a movie based on Leo Tolstoy's other great work, Anna Karenina, was proposed to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. The studio was concerned that the theme of adultery in Anna Karenina would not be well received by family audiences, and so an alternative focusing on the book's romantic subplot between the

idealistic gentleman farmer Konstantin Levin and the young socialite Kitty Scherbatsky was made instead.

The film was both a critical and box office failure. Critics questioned the use of slapstick comedy in the Tolstoy adaptation, as well as the spontaneous musical number on which the film ends. Oren Northern Oberon famously called the experience of watching *Kitty and Levin*, “the two most painfully wasted hours of my painful and wasted life” and went on to compare the film’s concept to, “killing a child to save its parasitic twin,” a comment which sparked a lifelong feud between Oberon and McCourt. Ronald Reagan decried the film as communist propaganda due to its Russian setting, prominent use of sickles in the wheat threshing scenes, and the similarity between the names Levin and Lenin.

Oren Northern Oberon (1913-1961) was an American director best known for his large scale dramas such as Nepal (1939), Byron (1947), and The Book of Daniel (1949). He died under mysterious circumstances in 1961.

The photo accompanying the overview section showed the director in his middle age looking older in a too-tight tweed blazer and a sallow frown, three big rings on a fat hand molded around a glass of whiskey. When exactly did the expectation arise for men to remain attractive as they aged? Women were judged for their looks as a matter of course throughout all of human history, but just half a century ago a man of a certain age could slip comfortably into a cross between an unsuccessful late-career academic and a very successful late-career pirate, and do so with dignity. I scrolled down past **1.1 Early Life** into **1.2 Career Beginnings**, and that’s where I found him, laughing back at me through time and space.

Black suit, smoke-filled lounge, leaning back into a leather couch, long legs crossed at the knee, civil war of a hairdo, Roman nose, barbarian smile, telling, it seemed, a very interesting story to his attractive acolytes, and there, from carved ivory fingers, he held out a gleaming cigarette case with initials engraved: O N O.

When I called Nina to tell her I'd met the ghost of Oren Northern Oberon at a party in his own excavated film set, she asked about recent changes in medication. After she realized I was serious, she said I'd been really wasted and I should just chalk it up to that. And no offense but wasn't it a little naive to believe in ghosts? I tried Aaron next. He picked up on the last ring and didn't even let me get to the part about the cigarette case before interrupting to inform me that the whole thing was scientifically impossible. (Aaron had been calling everything scientifically impossible since he'd decided he wanted to become a physicist last year.)

Only Max believed me. I told him that night during our kitchen drink talk, as he'd been too furiously focused on set and when we drove home, the news seemed too momentous to spill in the car. He didn't remember finding me outside and seeing the ghost, or much of anything from that night, but he said it made perfect sense. We already knew Babylon was haunted, and who better to haunt it than its creator?

"My friend Nina called me naive when I told her."

"*Naive*. I hate that. The world is so weird when you pay attention, what's really naive is to believe it follows any consistent logic."

I thought this was the smartest thing I'd ever heard him say, and told him so.

I read obsessively about his life, looking for clues. What tied him down to the earth? And why me? He could have appeared to anyone at the party. Had he been waiting for years to find a person who could understand him? A person who could help him? I made fun of myself for thinking these thoughts, but I thought them sincerely and often. Max would take me to the set in the desert or the Paramount lot, still half-hoping I'd suddenly become handy or interested, and I'd sit there, giving the impression of intense observation, creating elaborate scenarios in my head where I ran into Oren Northern Oberon again, living or dead, and we had long, interesting conversations. I even gave him some of the witty dialogue. I watched interviews with Stan Satterly, Johnny Carson. Johnny says, "I'm *not* a failed magician; I pursued other opportunities" and Oren replies, "Johnny, I didn't mean to insult you! We're *all* failed magicians." I read anecdotes I found online, pulled from interviews and bankrupt movie star tell-alls. Sammy Davis Jr: He called Frank Sinatra the unctuous ideal of an America that never existed, and Frank had someone punch him in the face. Jett Martins: I saw him walk up to the largest of the *Book of Daniel* lions and hug it. He sat silent in the dirt with his arms wrapped around that lion for an hour and a half. He thought he was alone. Tallulah Bankhead: Oren ate caviar off my naked body then cried himself to sleep.

Max told everyone on set about the ghost. He saw it as a sign that the dead director was giving his blessing to Max's movie. He couldn't appear directly to Max because he knew Max would recognize him, so he'd sent a sign through me. Nobody really believed him but they let him talk because he told stories wonderfully, and because he was the director. This was agony to me. It made me look like one of those people who keeps a weekly appointment with a psychic and uses healing crystals to cure headaches, or a pathological liar, or both. People might allow a famous director to be slightly crazy, but this permissiveness does not extend to his relatives. The

story shifted with each retelling. Now he remembered clearly seeing the ghost when he stepped outside to find me. Now the ghost had smiled at him and said, “Fight the good fight, MacNamara.”

I didn't talk about him at all after that first day. Not because I doubted my memory or surrendered to science--although I trusted myself on nothing else, I knew what I'd seen with fundamentalist certainty. But the more I thought over the conversation, the more sure I became that I should have kept it to myself.

A few nights later Max went out to see some girl, assuring me he'd be back by four or five in the morning, probably. I lay on the couch trying to read the Russian death book for a while then got up, went outside, pressed my back up against the cold tile, and waited.

CHAPTER FIVE

I didn't even fully admit to myself the reason I was standing there; I needed plausible deniability. Just getting some fresh air, definitely not attempting to coax a ghost out from his immaterial dwelling. I wished I had something to do with my hands, maybe a cigarette. But then smoking ruined your skin and teeth. (There was also the matter of cancer, but this didn't hit with the same impact as wrinkles.) Before they destroyed you though, cigarettes made you look so elegant and worldly, and I might be dead before the effects caught up with me anyways. I'd wanted for so long to make my own choices, but now that I had to, I couldn't. Choices are tyranny. Well, objectively, that's just incorrect. But who was I to go on about objectivity?

My indecision made me feel blurred, abstract. But even that was stupid, in its way. Why did I feel the need to hack off all contradictions, to force myself into consistency? Too much TV had assaulted my brain, turning people into characters--a story-soaked psyche is hopeless. Those kids whose moms wouldn't let them watch Spongebob and gave them yogurt for dessert were probably all soaring through the infinite, exquisite space of their indefinite selves now, while I was stuck waiting for a ghost, agonizing over whether or not to take up smoking. Having sunken myself into this broad, shallow dissatisfaction, I peeled my back from the now warmed tile and started to slink inside. Only then did I hear the sound of his footsteps, coming from the side of the palace, growing louder. He turned the corner and walked up to me, perfectly timed, as if he'd been watching.

“How come you just walk up?”

“As opposed to?”

“Just appearing?”

“Too cliché.”

I quit trying to ground to reality with chatter. We looked at each other. Maybe he'd been looking the whole time, but I'd been too busy thinking. He seemed a little older than he had before, forty or a hard-lived thirty-five--worn around the eyes, thinner in the lips, thicker at the neck. He was wearing a dark jacket like he had at the party, but this one sagged at the shoulders, frayed at the cuffs. Still, he looked just as solid as before, just as opaque, as much subject to brutal gravity as I myself was. An unsettlingly pedestrian presentation of the paranormal. What was he made of? How had he handed me that gold case, as hard and cold as any metal; how had he lit my cigarette? Was it even a real cigarette? I wished that I hadn't gotten so drunk at the party, that I'd kept track of the details. He ran his hand through his hair and made a face like he was about to speak, but didn't.

I jerked my hand out then left it hovering lonely in the air. I wanted to touch him. That's a scary thing to want even from a living person. If I tried, could I reach right through him? I dropped the hand.

“I'm not quite sure what to say,” he said.

“Me neither.”

Further up the hill, a coyote howled. He turned in the direction of the noise, but I didn't dare look away, convinced that as soon as I took my eyes off him, he'd disappear.

“Are you angry?”

“What?”

“Is that why you came back? Because you're angry we dug up Babylon and disturbed you, or something?”

He dropped his shoulders, which I hadn't seen tense up in the first place. "It's not the set. I have no attachment to an empty vessel."

"The movie then?"

"I do have serious reservations about *that*, because as you know, the original film, *my* film, contains intention in every frame, even the symbols function within a certain consistent philosophy, and what this person plans on doing with my work--"

"I haven't seen it. Yours, I mean..."

"Hm."

"Why are you here then?"

He sighed and took his cigarette case from a pocket sewn into the breast of his jacket. He held it for a second before popping it open, and his hand molded around it, like foam. Did that hurt? He lit his cigarette then silently offered me one, which I silently accepted. After the first drag, he finally spoke. "That's what I'm trying to figure out."

He hadn't really 'come back' at all. He felt himself die. He woke up in the desert, looked up at the brutal blue sky, across to the expanse of beige waste, heat he couldn't feel casting mirages on the rocks. He was feeling not quite himself anymore. For forty years he wandered the desert alone, a cursed creature. When the excavation crew first arrived, he thought: Judgement Day. But it had been ten years; why didn't he ever talk to Max? What? *That* guy? Forty years is a long time to be alone with your thoughts. You become them; they become you. Another five is hardly anything at all. But then you came. And to live like this, if you can call it living, is to fall forever through an echoing abyss, kept sentient only by the sliver of humanity, of hope, hidden so deep inside that you can't rip it out no matter how desperately you try. That is, it's very lonely. I thought you were a person I could talk to.

His shoes started to erase themselves. He only noticed when he saw me staring, then shrugged, helpless. Nothing began to overtake him, rising like a sandstorm to eat more and more of his body.

“Will you come again?” I asked.

“I’ll try. Tomorrow night.”

The clock mocked me all day. I’d hardly slept, phasing between manic and dazed, and when I tried to waste my time reading or watching TV, I found myself too jittery to concentrate on anything except the slow-gathering minutes. My brain was a mass of tangled wires, pulsing, fraying at the edges. Colors grew brighter; logic faded. How? Max invited me to the set, but I said I had a headache, covering my head with my pillow for emphasis. (He was too much of a liar himself to ever believe this, but I thought he’d appreciate the implied respect of an attempt to be convincing.) I peeled a hole in the lavender paint on my wall then moved my bed to cover it, then pushed the bed back again and peeled off more. I painted my fingernails gold, but ruined them by touching my hair before they dried. I picked gold nail polish out of my hair with tweezers. I took a walk around the neighborhood in one hundred degree heat and came back dizzy and drenched in sweat. I showered, shaved my legs. I smoked the last of my weed then regretted it, because now I was jittery and spaced at the same time, and kept catching unattached shadows in my peripheral vision. I Googled ‘how to get less high’ and a 2006 DrugForum comment told me to snort black pepper. I did. This was a mistake. I showered again. It had been ninety minutes.

By sunset I had run through a decade’s supply of patience. I felt older. I went outside waited for twenty minutes, but the ghost didn’t come. Of course I had expected this. He hadn’t

appeared the night before until later, past midnight. I checked the door twelve times in the next three hours. On the thirteenth round, I heard a slam, and jumped. Babylon had funhouse acoustics, and I couldn't tell where the sound had come from. "Mia!"

Oh. Max. I hadn't expected him to come back so soon or, based on the pattern of the last week, at all. I considered hiding from him, but the logistics of pulling this off then later coming up with a viable explanation alluded me. "Yeah?" I called back.

We went to the kitchen and he poured drinks. I let mine sit, but he didn't notice. It had been a terrible day. Tommy bullied Lucia until she cried and the lights guy sprained an ankle. Then he went to dinner with *someone* (*Someone* was a frequent character in his stories but I knew he wanted me to ask who she was, so I never did.) and saw Isolina. She walked in with a man, and didn't turn around or even have the courtesy to look like seeing him had ruined her night. She sat down and said something to the man, who craned his neck to look at Max, then *laughed*. They had laughed at him. Fuck. Did it ever end?

Maybe I'm being unfair to Max. There was more to the story than that--it's just that I couldn't force myself to pay attention. Meaningful eye contact and occasional nodding was usually enough for him anyways. How could I get out of here? Usually we talked for hours on nights like this, and there was no way to plausibly pretend I had plans, considering I knew nobody and sat around all day doing nothing. I'd already used the headache excuse, and Max had subtle ways of reminding me I owed him. He'd say, "I'm worried you don't like it here" or "Have you called your mother?" I checked my phone. 11:44.

At parties, back when they were together, Isolina would pointedly ignore Max, just to spite him. She'd look right past him sometimes. It was really conspicuous. People commented on it, even. But then at other times, they had been so *connected*. She gave him these looks, these

indescribable looks, and he could just tell she *understood* him. That's hard to find. He might not ever find it again, actually. This new girl, she's great, really wonderful actually, but did she understand him?

Anything described as indescribable is probably bullshit and anyways I'd heard this all before. "I can see how much this affects you," was my razor sharp observation. "Maybe get therapy?"

"Yeah, I should. I know I should. But we don't finish filming till mid October and there's no way to do anything else until that's done, and..."

It's true I could have just told him I'd seen the ghost again, but even the thought of that now made me choke up with dread. He'd treat it like a game. He'd want to do some theatrical séance, and what's more, the ghost wouldn't come. He wanted me, not Max. He had methods, and reasons. 11:53. Nina said you could fake a petit mal seizure by swaying back and forth and blinking a lot--even if you weren't very good at acting everyone would believe you or pretend to believe you because you can't accuse somebody of faking a seizure. But then Nina said a lot of stupid shit and even if I pulled it off, Max would just call an ambulance. Obviously.

"God, Mia, I'm sorry to put this on you."

"It's okay." I could tell him I'd promised to call Aaron, but it was three in the morning in New York. Of course Aaron was a teenage boy so he kept strange hours in the summertime but still, a call *scheduled* for three AM didn't sound plausible.

"You *get it*. Not everybody does." He laughed suddenly, bitterly, startling me back into reality. But no, that wasn't his laugh. Too sharp, somebody else. My eyes refocused on the figure behind him.

The ghost was leaning against the marble counter, examining a kitchen appliance that looked like a raygun. “What’s this thing do?” he asked, pointing it at me.

“Nobody knows.”

“Knows what?” Max followed my eyes to the counter then turned back to me, bewildered. The ghost had set the kitchen gun down in time, but now spun it towards Max, who just blinked and turned away.

“Sorry. Just spaced out for a second.” This wasn’t a great lie but Max was disoriented, so he took it.

“How have you been? In general. Haven’t seen much of you these past few weeks.”

“Oh. Good. Just reading and stuff.”

The ghost was circling the kitchen now, and it took all of my self-control not to watch him. Max ran his hands through his hair. He could sense the change. “That’s good.”

The ghost came up behind Max, who was swaying in his barstool. He leaned over until his chin was almost touching Max’s shoulder, then drew up his bottom lip in contempt, looked to me, and shrugged. “You wondered why I never felt the need to talk to this person?”

“I’m tired.”

“Sorry, I wasn’t even thinking!” said Max, with helpless earnestness, willing the interaction to end. My uncle really was an intuitive person, and I wondered if he didn’t spend his whole life trying to kill his intuition, then gently, lovingly nursing it back to life, before attacking it all over again when it grew too strong for him. He swallowed more vodka soda. “You should get some sleep.”

I felt the ghost behind me as I climbed the stairs but said nothing, afraid Max might overhear, until I'd shut the door to my lavender nightmare room. Even then, when I opened mouth, I couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't make me seem like an idiot. Realizing my open mouth was doing that job all on its own, I brought my jaw up, then grabbed the crumpled comforter from the ground and shook it out. I hadn't properly made a bed since I'd gotten kicked out of summer camp for running away when I was twelve, so I just smoothed the blanket down on the mattress, then sat on the edge, waiting for the ghost to speak. He stood back against the door and took out a cigarette for himself, not offering me one this time.

"You didn't come when you said you would."

"Max got home early. He was upset and I couldn't figure out how to leave without telling him about you and I figured you didn't want that."

"I was waiting for you."

"Sorry."

He lit the cigarette. How does a nicotine addiction carry over after death? "It's okay. I understand."

"Can I ask you a question?"

He exhaled a cloud of that iridescent smoke and motioned for me to go on.

"Why couldn't Max see you in the kitchen? He saw you at the party."

He shrugged. "I wanted him to see me at the party."

"What do you do all day?"

"What do *you* do all day?"

"I don't know. Sit. Decompose."

He smiled so I smiled back. Neither of us spoke. I didn't want to offend him, make him regret appearing to me. This was probably the only really interesting thing that would ever happen to me in my entire life. I had to play it right. What to do with my face? I tried to look sympathetic, but also casual, so as not to seem uncool, but also intense, so as not to seem more concerned with coolness than the astonishing improbability of the situation he had presented me with. Thank God the mirror was behind me. After watching me squirm for too long, he spoke. "I'd like to ask you for help."

"With what?"

He sighed. "It's very difficult to get anything done in this state."

"And you want... to be set free?"

"To escape it, yes."

It clicked. Mysterious circumstances. Overdose on the coroner's report. Body lost or stolen. Strangers at the funeral. Police file opened, closed, destroyed in a fire. "Your death."

"Yes."

"What even happened?"

"I don't know. Don't remember."

"Oh." I had been biting dried skin from my lip unconsciously until pain alerted me, and now I had to mop up the blood with my tongue. "But we could research it. Figure something out."

"Yes. If you would do that. If you would help me." His eyes like fire in a cave--I guess it's embarrassing to give you a metaphor about his eyes.

"Or I could get you a psychologist. To work through the trauma. Maybe you'd remember what happened?"

“Psychology is a sham.”

“Okay yeah we could research it. Of course I’ll help you.”

His face relaxed, and only then did I realize how tense it had been. He said, “Don’t laugh.”

“What?”

“Don’t laugh at me when I say I’ve been waiting so long for somebody like you.”

The ghost glided forwards like a tropical fish unaware of its own alien beauty, and sat beside me on the bed. He loomed over me but didn’t make a dent in the mattress. “Can I touch you?” I asked.

He nodded. I drew my hand up to his heart. It didn’t pass through. He was physically present, undeniably, and felt soft and airy, the consistency of cotton candy. I pressed my fingertips into his chest. They made a dent, and the cotton candy matter felt cold against them. I withdrew and brought my fingers to my mouth. The dent didn’t fade. I looked to his face, but the smile hadn’t left. “Does that hurt?”

He shrugged.

CHAPTER SIX

After that the ghost never left for very long. I’d wander down to the kitchen after waking up at noon--Max had stopped asking if I wanted to come to set after three or four excuses--and see him lurking around the counter or in the throne room, reading a novel he’d lifted from Max’s shelves. (They both loved those mid-century misogynists: Miller and Mailer and Kerouac &

Company.) He liked when I looked startled so I learned to keep a neutral face and expect him in every room.

In the first few days, we were shy with each other, over-accommodating. He offered me too many ectoplasmic cigarettes and I agreed too quickly to all of his offhand opinions. (Byron's genius came from his club foot. Too much sunshine makes you weak and apathetic. Doris Day was probably lobotomized.) I wanted the ghost to like me, and soon it didn't seem so strange that the ghost wanted me to like him too.

He never said, "Call me Orrie," but I couldn't keep on with 'the ghost' and 'Oren' fell flat in my mouth. He said he didn't mind the nickname, although he hadn't had one since he was a little boy, when the other kids took to calling him Bonebreaker Jake.

We never did much except talk, and we could go on for hours. I'd never met anyone living who I'd found even half as interesting.

We talked about our feral New York childhoods--his had been angry, mine sad. We'd both been obsessed with death from the time we could conceptualize it and had steadily drowned ourselves in dread ever since. We had both been four years old when we realized we would die some day, and we both remembered the exact moment of realization. How could a person go on living when every second spent brought you closer to death? And of course the only answer this question ever earned either of us was, "Don't worry..." We'd both thrashed our mothers into a state of quiet, perpetual disappointment before we'd memorized our multiplication tables.

"I hated being a kid." I told him. "I was so *bad* at it."

He looked at me with disarming sincerity. "Me too."

We talked books, which was especially wonderful because my friends back home might as well have been illiterate. We both loved Tolstoy and William Blake and thought *The Tempest*

was the best Shakespeare play, although in his opinion it tied with *King Lear*. He loved *The Master and Margarita* when I gave it to him, and when he told me to read *As I Lay Dying*, I lied and told him it was a revelation even though really I couldn't get through three consecutive pages.

He told me all about Old Hollywood. "The scene was savage, but the scene was new," and everyone was secretly a gay Jew. For a week on-and-off, I caught him up as well as I could on the twenty-first century, laughing as he pivoted back and forth between horror and delight.

He summarized the thoughts of different philosophers--Descartes and Locke, Rousseau and Kant, then Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, Camus and Sartre. The only one I admitted to not understanding was Hegel, but he assured me nobody actually understood Hegel. He considered himself a sensualist. The basic idea here was that the only parts of life that mattered were the ones you regretted and the ones you consciously did not regret. Everything else was filler. The goal of the sensualist was to feel as much as possible, good and bad, because feelings and sensations were the only things you could know to be real, even if their causes remained elusive. The more you felt, the more you lived. He needed taste and touch and youth and novelty. He asked to cut into my hip at one point with a Boy Scouts pocket knife he'd found in his years wandering through desert.

We argued about whether Nothing was black or white. He said it was black, and science would back him up: black was how the eye processed an absence of color, whereas white was the combination of all colors. So I was precisely and completely wrong. My vision of Nothing was actually Everything. But darkness is more suggestive. In a pitch black room, you can still sense that you're surrounded by objects, trust that a concrete reality surrounds you as you fumble for the light switch. I'd seen pure white only once, back in January while staying with my

grandparents Upstate, when I walked out into a blizzard and lay down. It numbed my senses until I had no connection to the physical world, until Aaron found me, and asked me what the fuck I was doing, and helped me up, and never mentioned it again.

Only two subjects were off limits: my uncle and Orrie's death. I tried to bring up the latter sometimes but he'd always change the subject. Only once did I insist. How could I help him if we couldn't even talk about it? He said he felt depleted and left the room. I tried to follow him out but he shut the door in my face and had disappeared by the time I opened it. I did understand though, how a person's own death might be a sensitive subject, but figured it couldn't hurt to start researching on my own.

There were no conspiracy theory websites devoted to his death like there were for movie stars and musicians, but some crazy guy published a ninety-nine cent eBook on Amazon explaining how and why the FBI had murdered various public figures, and one three page chapter detailed how they'd accidentally tortured Orrie to death trying to make him give up information about the Communist Party then staged it to look like a suicide. I brought this up to him as gently as you can bring up government torture-murder. He didn't get mad like I'd expected, instead just laughing warily and explaining that he was never a communist, always unable to make himself care much about the masses.

“But couldn't they have made a mistake? Like maybe the *Kitty and Lenin* guy told them--”

“Don't talk to me about McCourt.”

“Okay but it's possible?”

“No.”

Then what did happen, if you're so sure? was a question I didn't ask him.

Orrie was amazed by the internet, and engaged with it with the confidence and ignorance of a 1920s anthropologist taxonomizing tribes in the Amazon. I showed him some porn to gauge his reaction but he said it was a grotesque mockery of lovemaking and made me turn it off. Instead, he just liked to ask Google questions (He saw it as a sort of robotic Oracle at Delphi: “Am I doomed to perpetual dissatisfaction?” “What should I do with myself?”), watch artistic music videos and surf Wikipedia. “Condensed into this quarter-pound of wire and metal,” he said once, skimming through the Wikipedia page for František Kupka on my phone, “is all the world’s knowledge.”

“Not everything.”

“No?”

“Like if you Google, ‘how to kill yourself,’ for example, all you get is a little message telling you not to kill yourself and list of phone numbers for suicide prevention hotlines.”

“If you really want to die, you figure it out.”

Orrie didn’t immediately read his own Wikipedia page, which I think took a considerable amount of willpower, but when he did, he was quietly furious for the rest of the day.

“‘Died impoverished, in relative obscurity’?”

“But then ‘experienced a revival with the rise of auteur cinema in the 1970s!’”

“I was not obscure.”

“Just edit it then.”

“You can do that?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Oren Northern Oberon

There was an alley where the neighborhood boys would gather to fight in the summer, surrounded by steaming bags of trash. They didn't like Jacob but always brought him along because he put on a good show: danced around like a real boxer, fought dirty, went for the nose, brought blood. If he lost, he'd never admit it. Sometimes a fight would end with Jacob curled up on concrete, clutching a cracked rib, seething with rage. His opponent, bigger and older but not nearly as decisive, would shuffle in place, silent, unsure what to do with his hands. The crowd would stop jeering. Somebody would extend a hand to help him up, only to see Jacob spit red and glare. As the other boys drifted off in pairs, trying to figure out how their game had turned into *that*, Jacob would drag himself upright and call out through the blood in his mouth, "I'm not done!"

He wasn't fighting the boys in the alley. He was fighting God.

God, who had abandoned him. Who had betrayed him. Who had plucked him from Heaven and dropped him in a soiled and senseless world, in a brain in a skull in a wrap of meat and skin, where he was alone. (Once, when he was very young, before he'd started scrapping in the alley, he woke up weeping from a dream that had showed him what he'd done to be cast out from Heaven. He tried to tell his mother what had happened, but she just laughed. "Heaven! They teach you that in school?" She believed only in Hell.)

When he wasn't fighting or bleeding in bed after a beating, Jacob went to the Alpine Cinema in Bay Ridge. This was the only place where he could slip the noose of isolation. Movies were still silent--new and wild and wondrous. They were not cynical; they had the power to amaze. The audience laughed together, gasped together, one brain with a hundred mouths, together inside the image.

At a certain point, this was no longer enough. He grew into his own head; the movies became formulaic and the collective comfort of the theater began to look dull against the brilliant landscape of his singularity. It seemed such a waste, for his ideas to sit stagnant inside him, to let the rest of the world languish in its mediocrity.

In high school he read a speech by Abraham Lincoln about the dangers of Towering Genius:

Towering Genius disdains a beaten path. It seeks regions hitherto unexplored. It sees no distinction in adding story to story upon the monuments of fame erected to the memory of others. It denies that it is glory enough to serve under any chief. It scorns to tread in the footsteps of any predecessor, however illustrious. It thirsts and burns for distinction; and if possible, it will have it, whether at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving free men.

'Oh!' he thought, 'That's me.'

He left home at nineteen, heading west like all the rest. He picked oranges in Florida, grapes in Napa Valley. He made it to Hollywood, bussed tables at the Mocambo. He wrote a script and slipped it into the briefcase of a stumbling drunk producer at the end of a shift. The producer bought it. He wrote a second script, and a third. The producer bought these too, and

Jacob along with them. Writing scripts was easier than picking grapes. All he had to do was write the world the way it was supposed to be. Right the world.

He changed his name. He needed to sound trustworthy. Who would trust a movie written by Jacob Abraham Silberstein? Jim and Jack and Al were all honest names but nobody would have believed them on Jacob. He needed something that said, 'you'll never begin to understand what I mean, but if you don't want your friends to see how stupid you are, you'll just have to trust me.' He settled on Oren Northern Oberon. This choice, coupled with the strange way he'd begun to inflect his sentences, sparked a ridiculous and widely-spread rumor that he was the youngest son of the last governor of the smallest state in British India.

After five years as a screenwriter, Oren directed his first picture in 1940, *Nepal*, a love story between a British boy and an Indian girl in Delhi who run away together then freeze to death. In Nepal. He wrote the script as a joking nod to the India story, and agreed to direct it just to work with a live tiger--he respected wild animals more than people. Still, *Nepal* had a bright, frantic energy to it, and it slipped through the studio censors almost exactly as he'd cut it. By all accounts, a fine film.

The success of *Nepal*, and its successor *The Still Life*, came to be an insidious curse. The Studio paid attention to him now, and America was at war.. They wanted him for their high budget propaganda dramas: Submarine captains. The Nurse Corps. Hemingway adaptations. Technicolor. He wasn't serving like Ford and Capra were--failed physical: skeletal inflammation--so really, wasn't this the least he could do for his country?

It ruined him. The grand vision squandered, betrayed. Twentieth Century Faust. And for what? Money? Nationalist dogma? The war films came to him pre-written, and directing them became an act of self-mutilation. Because they were *almost* Oberon films. Moviegoers couldn't

tell the difference. Cameras sweeping over mountains, valleys, roiling waves, lingering on hands, mouths, folds of fabric, silent moments too intimate for a twenty foot screen--but here comes the snappy dialogue! Classic Oberon. The soul was gone, the grand landscapes now backdrops for slaughter set to swelling instrumentals, the intimate moments now self-conscious caricatures of love and agony.

To make the best of the situation, he wrote his own war film, in which a young private, separated from his unit in an Italian village, hides in the rubble of a bombed-out cathedral as the German soldiers march through. When night falls, he jumps out from behind an overturned pew and brains a drunken German with a gleaming chunk of marble from the ruined cathedral before slipping away into the darkness. But a man should not kill on hallowed ground. There's a price. Something vital, some human quality inside the private, is taken along with the life of the German. Feral, half mad, he goes on to massacre German troops all throughout the countryside, slitting throats, crushing skulls, never to be caught or seen again in the light of day. A hero or a monster?

The studio head said the private wasn't noble. "Why doesn't he meet Jerry man-to-man, and show 'em what America's made of?" (It was only natural that the closest thing to nobility a Paramount executive could imagine was a petulant death wish.)

After two big budget acts of artistic cannon fodder, he refused to go on. He hid himself away in his house in the Hills, upped his whiskey intake to a bottle a day. If only he'd written novels! Gone into philosophy, poetry, or even politics. Anything but the movies. Anything but this. As directors went, he was the biggest audience draw the studio had, neck-and-neck with MGM's DeMille, but still there was no freedom in film; he was a slave. And what could a slave with any dignity do but run away?

He took visitors in his house, but he never dressed for company, or brushed his teeth, and he locked the front door right after his guests stepped through it. The columns said he'd lost it, and yet, throughout the pleading procession of friends and women, he never broke composure. He wasn't crazy, he wasn't drowning in despair. He was angry, and his anger made him godlike. No visitor came twice.

After three months of this, the mountain came to Muhammad. The executives arrived with bowed heads, breathing through their mouths to fend off the stench, promising him freedom. Just one more war films and you'll get to do anything you want for the next. Absolutely anything. We trust your vision. Just one more.

Oren acquiesced. A man must make sacrifices. He would waste a hundred and eighty more minutes of film stock on crying girls and bravely-waved flags and triumphant trumpets as the Germans all burned, then return to his vision.

He did the war film. He got married, divorced, remarried. Then, in 1947 he turned in his script for *The Dancers*, the block of marble from which he would chisel his masterpiece. Picture it: An idyllic American suburb, row after row of identical, freshly painted three bedroom houses, each with its own green lawn and white mailbox. A new family moves in. Broad-shouldered father returned home from the war, beautiful young mother, two blue-eyed children and a Labrador retriever. To welcome them, the neighbors host a barbeque. The whole block's invited. Hot dogs on paper plates, the smell of burning meat rising up into the sky. The fathers drink beer, the mothers sip spritzers, the kids chase each other in circles through the park. What a lovely welcome! A boy has brought his violin, and begins to play. And then, the new family's little girl begins to dance. How adorable, the mother says to her new friends, who smile and cluck in agreement. Soon the rest of the children have joined her, holding hands, bending

sharply. They pull their mothers in, who, in turn, grab their husbands. The whole neighborhood together in the park, dancing, laughing, American domestic bliss. They dance for hours. The sun sets. They keep dancing. The boy with the violin collapses in exhaustion in the middle of the night. The neighborhood keeps dancing. In the silence of the black night, you can hear their feet tearing up the grass. Another day passes, another night. They can't stop dancing. They are weeping now. Reporters and voyeurs come to see for themselves, but they too are pulled into the writhing mass of humanity. Screams of agony. Muscles torn apart, children dead from dehydration. The National Guard is called in. It's no good. The neighborhood is put under quarantine, and in identical idyllic suburbs across the country, families huddle around their radios, listening as the broadcaster explains with dread and fascination that the only solution is to stand back and wait for the neighborhood to dance itself to death. A slow pan of the carnage in the park. Men, women, and children, reporters, uniformed members of the Guard, all fallen in heaps on the once-green grass. No one is spared.

Well, said the studio, when we said *anything*, we didn't mean *that*. You can't expect us to give you money for *that*. Why not something audiences can relate to? Religion is doing well in test groups. You could even try Shakespeare! No, not *King Lear*. But we'd give you *Hamlet*.

After another stint of unwashed isolation, this time with fewer visitors, he emerged with new ideas, and never spoke of *The Dancers* again. He settled on the book of Daniel as his new source material, which was not his favorite book of the bible growing up--he preferred the ambiguous figures, David and Solomon and his former namesake Jacob--but Daniel was most suited to a visually intoxicating adaptation. A palatable classic hero for Paramount (Wouldn't Daniel meet Jerry man to man and show 'em what we're made of?) and for Oren, Babylon.

Though there was something relatable about a prophet held captive and reduced to party tricks, Oren would have cut Daniel out of the film entirely if he could have, and focused solely on the city. A palace in lapis lazuli with golden animals inlaid, beautiful women reclining in the sun, glittering beads of garnet braided into their hair, a city of wealth, of knowledge, of astonishing beauty. And yet, inextricable from this beauty was a code of reflexive and ritualized cruelty. Slaves worked to death, dissidents devoured by lions: a city of brutality, of inequality, of death. Of emotion. Of raw, unfiltered life. The ultimate synthesis of experience. Was it too much to ask?

Yes.

The Studio greenlit the project, with revisions. They wanted something more palatable, a greater focus on Daniel: valiant hero, stranger in a strange land--could we get James Mason for this? Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. Triumph of the spirit. Ingenuity, hard work, and bravery. Something with a shred of hope, for Christ's sake. Americans can't pronounce *Nebuchadnezzar*. We won't show a man being eaten alive by lions on screen. Nobody wants a history lesson. Can you add a love story? We understand what you're saying, 'art,' of course, but we're trying to sell a story here too. Like in *Nepal*. You can manage that again.

Oren smiled and nodded and disregarded every restriction the idiots imposed. Each plot point was woven so tightly into the fabric of his ultimate sensory experience that the Paramount editors couldn't string together a coherent narrative if they cut even a single scene. It was only fair that he deceived them now, *lex talionis*.

The Book of Daniel came together with miraculous grace. Oren controlled every aspect of the production with more stringent perfectionism than he'd ever felt compelled to practice before, and he'd once forced Isabella Crisp into forty-four takes of a single 'I love you' in *Byron*.

Where *Byron* had been an agonizing struggle towards beauty, *Daniel* flowed from him like cold water from a strange source inaccessible through any conscious pathways. He was drunk for most of it, if not off whiskey then off his own energy. He hadn't experienced this ease of generative power since *Nepal*, and *Nepal* was merely reputation-making. *Daniel* was epochal.

The Book of Daniel was the last and greatest of his works, and he always felt that it stole something from him, something nameless and sacred that he could never recover, and he was ever sure whether or not it was worth it in the end, to obliterate himself in the act of creation. Oh, but what sort of question is that? And really, what did it matter? He was broken, mentally and physically, and he'd wasted his life on fluff. He got divorced for the second time and began frequenting bars where nobody would recognize him. Biker bars in the desert. Sailor bars, down by the docks. He'd drink till he was as angry as he'd been as a little boy, raging against God, then he'd pick a fight. The bikers and sailors were all at least ten years younger than he was, and almost as angry. Oren always lost. He woke up head ringing as the sun rose once in alley, eyes black, wrist snapped, surprised at his own survival. God was giving him a message. He had lived for a reason, to create something more beautiful, more life changing, than had ever been filmed before. But what had God ever done for him? Beat him and mock him and toss him around. Surround him with ugliness. No, he wouldn't create for God. He'd die for himself.

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“What does it mean ‘blocked’? Banished?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“They blocked me.”

“I think you were supposed to keep in information about like the year of your birth and the names of your ex wives and so on.”

“Irrelevant.”

“They have a format. To keep it professional, you know?”

“I’m done with the Wikipedia.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I won't say Orrie understood me more than anyone I'd ever met before, but he understood a part of me I'd assumed nobody ever would. The part that spoke in noises, not words. What lead me ten feet up into a tree outside my grandmother's house in the springtime. (I would close my eyes, it was all too bright, and feel the soft sway of the branch in the wind, the sun against my face, hear the cries of new life all around me.) What filled a bath half way then cut my hip over and over again until my skin was a shredded mess and the water turned bright and opaque. (I would sit in the bloodwater until I was shivering, and when I stood up, my skin would be stained rust red.)

The reasons I never tried to explain this part to anyone were twofold: First, it only came out when I was alone, and shunned human interaction. Its presence worked actively against any kind of life in society, and I didn't know what would happen if I tried to bridge the two states of being. Second, trying to explain it made me sound insane. Sometimes now I wonder if it would have helped had I risked my already tenuous claim to sanity and told somebody--my mother, Aaron, any float in the parade of therapists they sent me to, even Max, maybe.

Orrie sniffed out the creature immediately, though he didn't mention it for a while. A few days into what I guess you'd call our friendship, I was eating cereal at the counter when he said, "You're a person who keeps mostly separate from other people."

I set down my spoon. "Hi?"

"Do you understand what I mean?"

"I have friends. It's just that they're in New York so that's why it looks like I'm a loser."

"That's not what I mean. You keep your *soul* separate."

“Isn’t that most people?”

“No. Most people are like your uncle.”

“How’s that?”

“They need priests. They need to confess, to be pardoned and told that they’re accepted and acceptable. Understood.”

“I want that too.”

“But you know you’ll never get it. And even if you did, you’d reject it out of hand, because what would you be if you couldn’t be an outsider?”

“And you?”

“My soul goes to my art, and my art goes to the people. It soothes the desire to be understood without polluting the mind with the thoughts of others.”

“That’s probably the most pretentious thing I’ve ever heard.” I laughed and went back to my cereal.

But his words lingered. I couldn’t escape the needling, insistent feeling that he was correct in his assessment. I was separate. I could not and would not be understood. What humans naturally sought in each other would be always denied to me.

Orrie had been annoyed at my judgement and left me there in the kitchen--walking out of the room like a real dignified living person; he never vanished into air like a ghost, although he said he could if he wanted to--but I found him a few hours later on my bed.

“What you said about me being separate,” I began, without greeting him, “it’s not like I was born like that.”

“Of course not.”

“But how can you survive any other way? I don’t know how people can go halfway. Let some things in and keep others out. I don’t know how you would do that.”

“Some people have less to manage.” This went against the doctrine of egalitarian suffering that had been instilled in me since childhood.--’Everyone is going through something’ and so on--but it was strangely comforting. After all, what was ‘something’? Spilled milk or genocide? And why was it supposed to make me feel better that the world was full of pain? Wasn’t it better to be honest about the sliding scale of suffering? And he said it with such crisp simplicity. *Some people have less to manage.*

I sat down beside him. I looked at him. I felt a sense of mutual understanding that transcended conversation. I said, “But not you.”

“No.”

“And how did you manage?”

“I didn’t. Not really.”

“But it was worth it? To have more?”

“Yes.”

Here too, I thought it better to believe him.

We saw *The Book of Daniel* on my laptop. He shushed me when I tried to comment on the dialogue and watched his masterpiece unfold in a trance. I spent most of the movie trying to think up what to say when he asked me what I thought. It must have looked better on a big screen in the fifties--tastes had changed, effects had advanced, and besides, I was unnerved by the image of all these strangers in my house, and the knowledge that they were all long dead.

I was relieved when he didn't ask, but also couldn't understand why he'd just made me sit through three hours of bible adventure then disappeared without a word.

He was gone the rest of the day and seemed distracted when he returned (from where, he never told me). Looking in the mirror, he said, "If I could have another chance at it..." Then to me, "*You* waste it."

He told me they'd built hanging gardens for the movie, on the roof of the palace, but they'd been edited out of the movie by soulless producers. What did they look like? Great bunches of lantern flowers flowing from gold wire baskets at the tops of palms, cascading down to the green ground, morning glories climbing black sparkling columns, a fountain full of lilies. Imagine the colors at dusk. Why would anyone cut that? They said, nobody will see a movie that's four hours and forty five minutes long.

"I'm sorry."

"I slept up there once, with the flowers."

"I wish I could have seen it."

At night, when it was cool enough to stay outside for any length of time, I stacked two boxes on a chair below the hatch that led up to the roof--I hadn't even noticed it until Orrie pointed it out--and hoisted myself up. He met me up there.

"Kind of desolate now," I said. The roof was a flat field of grey--they hadn't even bothered to paint it to match the rest of the house. Orrie cupped his hands over my eyes. The touch made me jump and the hands were only mostly opaque; I could still see vague shapes of light shifting around the roof when I squinted. When he lifted them, we stood in a garden. Lantern flowers hanging from palm trees, morning glories wound around columns, lily-strewn

fountain, exactly like he'd said, but shimmering and pale like half-settled star dust. All I could say was, "Thank you."

For the next few days he languished, having exhausted himself with the garden. I had a pounding, persistent headache, and took pills to trade pain for nausea. Orrie asked for one. I asked him how a pill would even work on him, but he said he was just curious. I gave it to him and he left me soon after, cradling it in the palm of his hand. The next day he said for the first time, "I'm hungry."

I ignored this complaint, because my head heard too much and I was exhausted, falling in and out of sleep, but when he repeated it the next day, I asked, "How?"

"I don't know but I'm hungry; I'm weak with hunger."

He wanted red meat. I took an Uber to the grocery store and picked out three shrink-wrapped steaks which he carried off to wherever he went, leaving me alone with the bloodstained styrofoam.

He came back pink and vital, twenty years old, smiling and explaining the book he'd just read, something tangentially kabbalistic he'd found on Max's overflowing shelf of never-opened holy texts. But could he come back in an hour or two? I needed a nap before I could think about the dimensions of my spirit. He understood, and sat quietly in the corner chair while I slept.

I had been exhausted all week, and when I wasn't sleeping, I had a headache. WebMD said acute sinusitis or chronic sinusitis or a brain hemorrhage. Maybe I should have seen a real

doctor but I hated real doctors so I just took more Oxy. Max had an alarming supply of it and never confronted me about its steady depletion.

CHAPTER NINE

Max was sitting at the kitchen counter with a script and a fountain pen. Orrie perched himself in a corner smoking and glaring at the back of his head. I sat down with Max.

“I’m thinking about getting an extra little condo or something. Doesn’t this place freak you out sometimes?”

“Not really.”

“You’re the one who saw a ghost.” He smiled, as if we were in on a joke together.

“Probably it was just a coincidence. Some guy who looked a lot like him.”

“You could think about it like that but, you know I like to think we have a connection, Oberon and I. I think the presence is benevolent.”

“It’s not,” said Orrie. He was picking his teeth with a lavender cocktail umbrella now, and I worried Max would turn around and see it floating.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“Cutting Lucia’s lines. Tommy’s pitching a fit. He says she can’t act but he just can’t handle any threats to his fucking status.”

“You should just leave it how it is.”

“He’s got a provision in his contract; he gets a certain amount of creative control.”

“I don’t even know how you can deal with him. He’s awful.”

“Sometimes.” He uncapped his pen and turned back to the script.

“Plus he’s kind of an overactor, I think. He was good like fifteen years ago but now he’s just a parody of himself.” I’d heard a film student say this at an NYU party Nina had brought me to once.

“Well I hope that’s not the case considering he’s the star of my fucking movie.”

“Sorry.”

His eyes were on the page now. “No I’m sorry. I’m under a lot of stress right now--don’t know why I do all this myself. But I’ll talk to you soon.” He didn’t look up.

I tried to nap but my heart was still beating like a lion was after me, so it took a couple pills before I could drift off. When I woke up, Orrie was on the bed next to me, stomach to the ceiling, hands behind his head. The sun had set, and he hadn’t bothered to turn on the light. We sat together in the not-quite darkness of the streetlamp-punctured night for a while as my head cleared, then I asked him, “What are you thinking about?”

“Your uncle. He’s ruining my movie.”

“In what way?”

“There’s no soul.”

“Oh.”

“He has no soul.”

This struck me as strange. Why make inaccurate criticisms about someone so easy to criticize accurately? “What do you mean?”

“Money. He only cares about money.”

“Depends on his mood.”

“He’s pathetic.”

“Yeah.”

“No soul.”

I sat up. “He definitely has a soul. Just doesn’t know what to do with it, I guess.”

“What would you know about soul?”

Really? What did I know about soul? “What does it matter?”

“It’s my legacy. It’s the only thing I have left.”

“No I mean the soul thing. Souls are an abstract concept.”

“You’re missing the point. Don’t you see what he’s done to my movie? He’s cut out the heart.” He rolled over to pull threads out of a tassel on a pillowcase.

I sat still. And even though I knew I should drop it, “You know, you’re not really so different.”

“We share sixty percent of our DNA with bananas; what’s your point?”

“Really? Sixty percent?”

“Probably more in his case.”

“Ha.”

“I read that on the internet.”

“Great.”

He turned back to me. “I can’t let this happen.”

“What do you mean?”

“That I can’t let it happen.”

“Orrie, what are you going to do? Don’t do anything.”

“Would that be inconvenient for you?” I could see the shadow of his smile twisting up.

I reached over to the lamp on my bedside. His face looked worse in the light, hard and mean. His collar was stained with two spots of what must have been blood. I said, “Don’t.”

“What right do you have to ask anything of me? What have you ever done to me that gives you the right to ask me to let them ruin my legacy? To do nothing?”

“To not ruin my uncle’s movie? Or what are you talking about?”

“You want me to kill it? To kill my own child? ‘Take your son, your only son, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah. Build an altar there and sacrifice him as a burnt offering on the mountain I show you.’ But Isaac was spared! You’re not testing me. You really want me to kill it.”

“I don’t want you to do anything!”

He veered up then, body expanding outwards with an ease no creature with a proper skeleton could manage and rushed towards me, engulfing me completely for a second before disappearing, leaving me shivering and alone.

All the napping had further derailed my already vampiric sleep schedule so I was wide awake, though exhausted, when Max came stumbling in at four in the morning yelling, “Let me give you the grand tour!” A girl laughed in response.

Though the house had thin plaster walls and strange acoustics, I couldn’t hear anymore of what he and the girl he brought home were saying. I could imagine it, but tried not to. Max was what, forty-seven? He was kind of pathetic, really, and the fact that he knew he was pathetic didn’t make him any less so. I hoped I’d either be dead or boring by forty-seven. I heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and put my headphones in.

I stumbled down to make breakfast at noon the next day, and found a stranger in the kitchen alone. Long black hair knotted, teal silk dress wrinkled, sitting on a barstool with her back to me. My mom had always introduced her boyfriends to me over planned dinners in which

all parties were given copious information and reassurance before hand, and I was asked about my classes and interests and friends. Never anything this laissez-faire.

“Hi.” I couldn’t sound surprised.

She returned the greeting, spun her barstool around, and added, “You remember me right?”

I did. Riya from the party, who had snorted coke with me then tried to call an exorcist to burn sage at the house at two in the morning, the night I first met Orrie. Because I couldn’t just turn around and leave but had absolutely no idea what we could possibly have to say to each other, I asked, “How are you?”

She seemed unperturbed. “Oh, pretty good. You don’t have a hairbrush I could borrow, do you? And makeup wipes?”

“Yeah.”

I meant to bring them down to her, but she followed me up the stairs, almost outpacing me with her long legs, and talking about a new raw juice place in the neighborhood. I said, “One second,” so she wouldn’t follow me into my room, but she did anyways.

She looked around at the clothes-strewn wreckage of the lavender room, looking for something nice to say, and remained silent. I grabbed my makeup wipes from the bathroom but withheld them a moment. “So, you and Max.”

“You didn’t know?”

“No.” I gave her the wipes.

“He said he tells you pretty much everything.”

“Did he?”

“And that you’re a great listener.”

I laughed. It came out deep and bitter like the laugh of someone much older.

Riya looked away.

I said, “He tells me you are too. I mean, he said the girl he was seeing was a good listener. And I guess you’re the girl“

“Yeah.”

She made me avocado toast, and I suppressed my amazement at the presence of the avocados in Max’s fridge. I’d never seen anything green in there before, except for a mold colony on a forgotten takeout carton of rice. He must have planned this. And if he’d planned it, why couldn’t he have let me know? Max thought of me as more priest than niece, so what qualms would he have about it? Also, Riya? I knew I was getting an idealized portrait through his mystery girl descriptions but I’d pictured somebody who was at least intelligent. I wanted to ask, Are you in love with him? But instead said, “I like your dress.”

“Oh thanks, I made it.”

“Really?”

She only smiled.

I had finished my toast and wished I had something to do with my hands. Where was Orrie with his cigarettes when I actually needed them? Probably Riya looked down on smoking. The only acceptable LA vices are the ones that don’t make you ugly. We were out of conversation now, but still smiling to communicate good will.

“Riya?”

“Yeah?”

“At that party, where you guys met, how did you, why were you there?”

“You introduced us.”

“Right, but who invited you.”

“Oh, I just heard party noises and showed up.”

“What?”

“They always let you in if you look the part. Just say you were inside before with friends as had to take a call or something.” She said this with no shame, looking me in the eyes, and for the first time I could smile at her without forcing myself, because I’d found something to genuinely admire. Before I could say anything, Max walked in. He never woke up before noon on days when he wasn’t working. “You’ve met!”

“You went shopping.” I said.

After making sure we didn’t hate each other, he told us he was thinking about throwing another party, to celebrate the wrap. “I was thinking a theme thing. Have people dress up like *Book of Daniel* characters or something. Is that tacky?”

“No!” said Riya, “I love costume parties!”

“I’m not dressing up.”

The next few weeks were hectic, as Max finally filmed the scenes set in the house. The production had fallen behind schedule due to Tommy’s moods and they had to work overtime to catch up. The crew was delirious, and I sometimes caught them standing very still, staring at the walls. Once I saw a lump in my bed and assumed it was Orrie, only for it to roll over and apologize semi-coherently in the distinct smoker’s rasp of the assistant makeup artist. (When I expressed concern over the crew’s wellbeing to Max, he just replied, “Everything’s legal.”)

Mostly though, the movie stayed downstairs and I stayed upstairs, creeping past it only to get to the kitchen. Only Orrie traveled freely between the two levels. He was obsessed with the

movie, and with his own disdain for it. The dialogue was clunky, the pacing was all wrong, Tommy was too old, Lucia was too nice--"No bite."--the costumes were too gaudy, or maybe too subdued, the throne looked *different* somehow, the lighting emphasized the wrong compositional elements, etcetera.

And as many problems as Orrie had with the movie, the movie had with him. He dedicated himself fully to the task of haunting, like a proper ghost: moving cameras when the crew was distracted, playing with light switches, rolling marbles down the central stairs, slamming doors left open, opening doors left closed, a lot of other things to do with pushing around doors, because I guess that's most of what ghosts did in movies when he was alive. It was kind of pathetic, and I told him so. "Pathetic?! You should see their faces."

"They're underslept and disoriented--I could scare them if I wanted to."

"So you're saying I should ramp it up?"

"No."

"So I should just sit up here with you in your room and talk about our feelings while they desecrate my legacy beneath my very feet?"

I wasn't sure how to respond, so I didn't.

"Can you get more steak." It wasn't a question.

Max had stopped trying to coax me into taking an interest in the movie and stopped confiding in me too, except when he needed to complain about Riya--for everything else, he just went to her. I realized the reason I was supposed to hate Riya was that she had replaced me, but couldn't muster any emotion stronger than relief. When I wasn't drugging myself, I had long phone conversations with Nina, Aaron, even my mother. I couldn't say much about LA so I

asked about their lives, and learned more than I had in years about the people who'd surrounded me so constantly as they passed. The more I slept and popped pills and gave in to headaches and lingered on the phone with 917- numbers, the less I felt like I even existed in physical space. Orrie, meanwhile, grew more corporeal with every steak. When he sat on the bed now, his weight left a dent. His hands no longer curled like snakes around his cigarette case, but bent at the joints to form a solid grasp. Once I thought I felt his heart beat.

There were downsides to this development. He couldn't always disappear at will any more, and sometimes he flickered into the sight of people he didn't intend to let see him. As the weeks went on, the film crew grew more and more convinced that the movie was cursed. A cameraman saw him pacing back and forth behind Max, making faces, and the wardrobe supervisor watched for a solid five minutes as he trashed Tommy's trailer in the backyard. Somebody brought their toddler to work once, and the kid ran crying around the house, seeing "The Mean Man" in every doorway. The more level-headed among them assumed it was a crazed vagrant, and hired a couple of extra security guards, but the curse theory was by far more popular, even among the newly hired extra security guards. At first Orrie was upset by this loss of control but he quickly learned to use it to his advantage--making terrible faces whenever he flickered into view, crouching down like an angry animal. (The second most popular curse attribution, after the correct one, was a Chumash coyote shaman spirit, angry that the set was rebuilt on top of the sacred ancient burial ground it had sworn to protect.)

As the final days approached, Orrie grew more erratic. He refused to talk to me at all anymore and my only proof of his continued existence were trails of oil puddle smoke and distant footsteps, along with the stories of the crew, a few of whom broke contract and quit early after he hurled himself at them from the top of the stairs, only to disappear mid air, and so on.

Lucia's pug went missing too, but the coyotes might have nabbed it and I didn't bother to ask Orrie, even when I finally did talk to him again, knowing he'd take the credit even if he was innocent.

This conversation occurred a week after our last, the night after Max had filmed his final scene. He had invited me downstairs to celebrate with the crew and I did go down for a few minutes, but having no one to talk to and nothing to say, I left quickly. Sitting in my dark room listening to the sounds of fun rise up through the floor, I wasn't entirely surprised somehow when Orrie came to visit me. He opened my door but didn't enter, and leaning against the doorframe said, "Hello."

"Are you going to do anything?"

"Yes."

"Like what?"

He took out his cigarette case.

I said, "Something bad?"

"I had really hoped you'd be more understanding. That you'd understand me better."

"I understand you."

"In any case I wanted to stop by. I'll see you at the party?"

"Am I going to die?"

CHAPTER TEN

The party was set for two days after this conversation, although I'm sure if Orrie could have found a way to get Max to delay it another day to build dramatic tension, he would. I tried as much as possible to sleep through Wednesday and Thursday, and drugged myself for the party too, just to be safe.

Descending the staircase an hour after the party started, I couldn't make out any distinct individuals in the mesh of skin and silk, faces and limbs--just the energy of glee on the brink of frenzy. What a party! Isn't it beautiful? Aren't *we* beautiful? And so happy to be here! Into this I let myself be carried, as I knew then, to my own death.

And would that really be so bad?

Wasn't I already drifting apart, more fog than flesh?

And would anybody really be so inconvenienced?

Wouldn't they relish the chance to say, at other parties not quite as big and beautiful as this one, *I was there when that girl died at Max MacNamara's?*

I'd make the news, maybe get my own Wikipedia page.

But no, how self-centered could I get? Why should I assume I'd be the only target? Of course I didn't know *what* would happen, only that it would be bad. I stood swaying slightly, sweating from other people's body heat. Max caught me by the arm.

"Have you seen Riya?!" He yelled, over the noise.

"No."

"Enjoying the party?!"

“What if there was a fire, and everyone rushed the doors and clogged them up and we all died in a fire?”

“I can’t hear you!”

“There are so many people!”

“Yeah!”

I felt dizzy and almost slipped, but steadied myself on a passing gladiator.

“Are you okay?!”

“Yeah.”

“Make sure you drink water! I’ve got to go find Riya!”

And he left me there in the center of the soft mob, and it was just as well, really, because all throughout our conversation I’d been looking past him, scanning faces, wondering, *Where are you? Where are you?*

The human tide pushed me outside. I hardly noticed until the air hit my bare shoulders. More people, of course, but scattered, looking lost, guppies wandered off from the school. I pressed my back against the cold, familiar wall. Usually I’d take out my phone, check instagram or just type the alphabet over and over to look busy, but on this night I stood still with my head turned up towards the grey-blue haze of pollution hiding the stars. New York was no better and I wasn’t accustomed to stars well enough to mourn their absence but occasionally, alone in the dark, I’d remember we were surrounded by them, billions and trillions of them, stretching out into infinity, burning, dying, gathering themselves up again from the dust. Then I’d find something else, anything else, to distract me, because there’s nothing to be done about stars you can’t even see. “Cigarette?” A voice, masculine.

My stomach jumped; sunk--primal dread. I turned, Not Orrie. That guy. What was his name? From that dinner, the very first night. Chateau Marmont, too much champagne.

“Paul.”

“Right, Hi.”

“Just kidding! I’m Alex. Paul is my partner, my business partner, but I wanted to see if you remembered me!”

“I’m bad with faces.”

“Hey how come we never see you downstairs? For filming? Max said you were interested in the process.”

“Oh.”

“He talks about you all the time. Says you’re wise beyond your years.”

“I’m not. Nobody else says that.”

The sound of his fast-tapping foot finally registered through the benzo-haze, and I realized he must have taken something. No point in trying to hold a conversation when you’ve taken downers, but especially not with some gross guy on uppers.

“Paul--”

“Alex.”

“Alex, I’ve taken a bar and a half of Xanax so I don’t think I can really hold a conversation right now.”

“You’re doing fine! How about a drink?”

“I already had one.”

“How about another then?”

“I’m pretty sure that can kill you. Getting drunk on Xanax I mean.”

“Oh, don’t be like that!”

I didn’t respond, mesmerized for a second by a Babylonian nobleman and an oiled slave boy dancing in the grass. Sharp gestures, alien but intimate, moving to no music at all. Or was I just too gone to hear it? Hot hand on my face.

“You know, you’re really pretty. Don’t look much like your uncle, thank God. Wouldn’t that be weird?”

Refocusing on his face, dull eyes, dry mouth, that nose in the center, with its oversized nostrils, black voids, passageways to Hell, and the hand on my face leading into the arm, shoulder bridging to neck holding up head dented with face marked by those horrible black holes and I had to get away. I turned and stumbled back into the party. He called after me (Or did he? There was a noise, at least.) but I’d already been reabsorbed by the crowd.

Pushing past limbs, weaving through clusters of strangers, where are you? Give me a hint. Scent of iron, trail of oil puddle smoke, anything, just a hint.

“Mia!”

“No.”

“Hey! How are you liking the party?!” asked Riya, suddenly in front of me.

I smiled, scanned the room, nodded.

“Look! My dress! From the movie!” And it was. Lucia had worn it in a dream sequence, iridescent silk with a thousand open eyes sewed in currents down the hips.

“Really cool...” Did it blink at me? No, just the fabric shifting. I was not going crazy. Crazier. Why did I take those stupid pills? A waiter moving through.

“Champagne?”

“None for me,” said Riya, glowing in her dream dress. I took two. She spoke again, but I couldn’t hear through the swell of voices.

“What?”

“I hope things aren’t weird between us!”

“No!”

“Because of Max!”

“Right. I mean no. We’re good.”

“What?!”

“Good!”

“Good!”

“Are you going to the ghost?” I felt relief more than anything else. *Finally*. Let it happen. I’ve been walking around all night waiting to die. I’m tired. (And then the small thought: Riya? Really? Riya and not me?)

“Where is he?”

“In the kitchen.” And wasn’t everything always? Who ever managed to convince us, as a society, that we needed other rooms? Max had stationed a man at the door down to the kitchen but he was mostly for show, and didn’t even stop me to ask who I was as I passed him.

Max stood with the bar between him and a huddle of his acolytes and associates-- Tommy, Chris, Paul, Lucia, Riya, whose presence meant I must have been walking slower than I’d thought. He was clutching an empty flute of champagne the way you might clutch the hand of your brother in arms as he bled out on the battlefield. Desperation in his eyes, he turned to me. “Mia! You just missed the toast!”

“The toast.”

“For the movie. It’s been a ride! And you know what? You’ve really been there for me through all of it. I said that. I thanked you. In the toast. But you missed it.”

“Sorry.”

“Anyways we’re just going to have a drink down here, just the five of us, if you want to stay a while.”

“I actually thought, just wanted to say hi, yeah. I have a headache. Think I’ll go lie down.”

“You ok?”

“Yeah. Congratulations.”

“I think this is going to be big. I know it’s bad luck to say so but I can always tell with these things. Sort of a sixth sense thing, you know.”

“It’ll be big, yeah.”

“You know what Jeff told me? Years ago but I remember. He told me to look out for you.”

“I have a headache.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No.”

“About Riya?”

“What? Why do you keep thinking, I mean why would I care? Riya, yeah, she’s great.”

“Isn’t she?”

“But my head hurts.”

“Oh come on. I know that’s just what you say when you’re bored. You think I don’t pay attention but I do.”

“Do you?”

“Don’t leave me alone with these assholes.”

“I’m just, it’s kind of a bad moment.”

“It’s my party!”

“You have a lot of parties.”

“Just a glass of champagne.”

“I’ve had too much.”

“Fine. Me too. A glass of water then. Just don’t leave me alone with these fucking people.” I took a second to think up a response and he took the chance to grab a pair of coffee mugs from the cabinet above my head. I let him fill them up and hand one to me, then took a long gulp to avoid having to speak. He did the same, and we understood each other again.

“Max I’m sorry and I know it’s your party but I think this is all so stupid.”

“I know.”

“And everyone pretends it isn’t. And what are we supposed to *do*? With all of this? Not just this,” I motioned around the room, “but, I don’t know...”

“If by we, you mean you and I, I guess the answer is we can never really be happy, or never content anyways, and the best we can do is try to find something meaningful.”

“Is that what you do?”

“Sometimes. I don’t know.”

“Don’t you think you should have that figured out by now?”

“Nobody has it figured out.”

“Is that really true though?”

“Yeah.”

“And we can’t ever? Figure it out?”

“Not without lying to ourselves.”

“Then why not just kill ourselves?”

“You’re asking the wrong person.”

“I just think maybe there *is* something to understand. It’s just that you never managed to reach it so you pretend it’s not there.”

“Is there any grand point you’re working up to here?”

“I feel like a lot of adults have it figured out.”

“*It.*”

“Yeah.”

“Well, you know what, Mia?”

“What?”

“It’s my fucking party.”

“Yeah it always is.”

He sighed deeply to insist that he really was the mature one. “Let’s not do this tonight. I’m going to go find Riya.”

“Great. I’ve got a headache anyways.”

“Great.”

He turned around, and I left, rushing up the stairs and pushing through the crowd then up the second flight of stairs, past two more useless bouncers, into my room, where Orrie sat dejected on my bed, turning over as I rushed in, saying, “I hate big parties.”

“No you don’t”

“I hate this one. It’s grotesque.”

I shrugged.

“And you’re no better.”

“Okay.”

I felt dizzy. I sat down on the bed. I started to sway again but propped myself up with a hand dug into the comforter. In the other I held my phone, white-knuckled. I said, “Am I going to die?”

With those words, he jumped, moved like water until he froze, looming over me, hands on top of my wrists, solid. He must have meant for me to fall back, but I didn’t. Our faces were very close; if he were alive I would have felt the heat coming off him. “Do you want to die?”

“I don’t know.”

“You should know. Anyone who doesn’t know they want to live doesn’t deserve it.” He shifted his left hand and I felt whatever he was holding in it press against my skin, plastic, a bottle of pills.

“I want to live.”

“You don’t.”

“I do.”

“You don’t.”

“What do you want?”

“I want--I need it. I need it more than you.”

“So I have to die?”

“Yes.” I thought he almost looked sorry as he finally shaped sound waves around the truth we’d been avoiding for months. Who’s to say? Maybe I was just as prone as he was to forcing the sludge of sensation into a narrative arc. He opened his mouth again but the door knob began to shake before he could speak. Had I locked the door?

“Mia?” My uncle, of course. “Mia, can you open the door?”

I waited for Orrie to disappear but he just glared at me. I wondered if I could throw him off, if the heaviness in my limbs was the Xanax or his weight bearing down. He didn’t move and I didn’t try him. “I want to be alone.”

“I don’t understand what happened. I mean, we were so close there, for a moment. I never had kids of my own, you know--probably for the best, I’d just fuck them up, but what was I saying? I feel like we’ve drifted apart.”

“Max--”

“Unlock the door. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m just kind of dizzy. I can’t really get up.”

“Oh yeah that happens sometimes. Did you forget to drink water?”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s just talk then. All these people downstairs, so many people--and it’s my party too--but you know what? I don’t want to see any of them. I don’t care about them. I care about you, Mia.”

“Kill yourself.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Did you just tell me to kill myself?”

“No. It was talking to me, or, it’s a movie I’m watching.”

“Could you pause it?”

“What do you have to look forward to? What could you possibly do with this?”

“Mia, did you take something?”

“Think about what I could do with it!”

“I mean I won’t lie, I’ve had a bit to drink myself but if you’ve taken something.”

“Just do it. Just do it.” The pill bottle rattling, pretty full too. How many would it take?

“No.”

“Unlock the door.”

“No.”

“Do it.”

“No, no, I want--”

“What do you want?”

“*What do you want?*”

A sound cut through chaos, clear and high and pure like an angel’s trumpet from my hand, and the caller ID read *Mom*.