

THE
EMPEROR
OF
GLADNESS

A NOVEL

OCEAN
VUONG

Author of On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

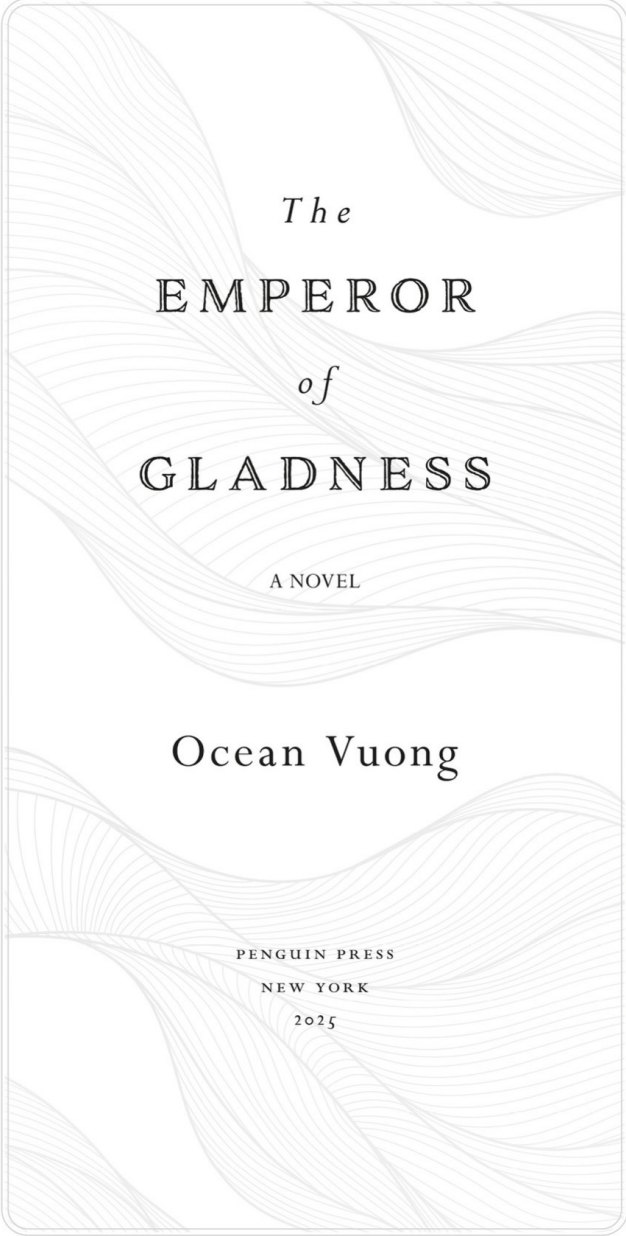
ALSO BY OCEAN VUONG

Time Is a Mother

On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous

Night Sky with Exit Wounds

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The book cover features a background of intricate, wavy line patterns that resemble water or fabric. The lines are thin and light gray, creating a sense of movement and depth. The text is centered and uses a mix of serif and sans-serif fonts.

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[*OceanofPDF.com*](http://OceanofPDF.com)

For Frances, who found me.

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Your worm is your only emperor...
We fat all creatures else to fat us
and we fat ourselves for maggots.

—*Hamlet*



Let be be finale of seem.

—*Wallace Stevens*

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1

The hardest thing in the world is to live only once.

But it's beautiful here, even the ghosts agree. Mornings, when the light rinses this place the shade of oatmeal, they rise as mist over the rye across the tracks and stumble toward the black-spined pines searching for their names, names that no longer live in any living thing's mouth. Our town is raised up from a scab of land along a river in New England. When the prehistoric glaciers melted, the valley became a world-sized lake, and when that dried up it left a silvery trickle along the basin called the Connecticut: Algonquin for "long tidal river." The sediment here is rich with every particle welcoming to life. As you approach, you'll be flanked by wide stretches of thumb-sized buds shooting lucent through April mud. Within months these saplings will stand as packed rows of broadleaf tobacco and silver queen corn. Beyond the graveyard whose stones have lost their names to years, there's a covered bridge laid over a dried-up brook whose memory of water never reached this century. Cross that and you'll find us. Turn right at Conway's Sugar Shack, gutted and shuttered, with windows blown out and the wooden sign that reads WE SWEETEN SOON AS THE CROCUS BLOOM, rubbed to braille by wind. In spring the cherry blossoms foam across the county from every patch of green unclaimed by farms or strip malls. They came to us from centuries of shit, dropped over this place by geese whenever summer beckons their hollow bones north.

Our lawns are overrun with ragweed and quack grass, one of them offering a row of red and pink tulips each spring, heads snared through the chain-link they lean on. The nearby porch overflows with rideable plastic toys, a wagon, tricycles, a fire truck, their primary colors now faded to Easter hues. A milk crate with a flap of old tire nailed across its opening is a mailbox set

on a rotted sideboard, *Ramirez 47* written on the rubber in Wite-Out. Beside this is a tin bird feeder the shape of Bill Clinton's head. Seeds spill from his laughing mouth and fall like applause each time the wind comes off the freighter that blows through this place in the night's unseen hours. Though the train never stops in our town, its whistle can be heard in every living room three miles out. *Nothing* stops here but us, really. Hartford, the capital built on insurance firms, firearms, and hospital equipment, bureaucracies of death and catastrophe, is only twelve minutes by car down the interstate, and everyone rushes past us, either on their way in or to get the hell out. We are the blur in the windows of your trains and minivans, your Greyhounds, our faces mangled by wind and speed like castaway Munch paintings. The only things we share with the city are the ambulances, being close enough to Hartford for them to come fetch us when we're near dead or rattling away on steel gurneys without next of kin. We live on the edges but die in the heart of the state. We pay taxes on every check to stand on the sinking banks of a river that becomes the morgue of our dreams.

Down our back roads, the potholes are so wide and deep that, days after a summer downpour, minnows dart freely in the green-clear pools. And out of the dark of an unlit porch, someone's laugh cuts the air so quick you could mistake it for a gasped-back sob. That beige shack flanked by goldenrods is the WWII Club, a bar with three stools and a wood-paneled vending machine stocked only with Marlboros and honey buns. Across from that are brick row houses. First built for men who worked the paper mill on Jennings Road, they now house veterans who come home from every battlefield you can think of to sit on plastic lawn chairs staring at the mountain ridge before shuffling back into smoky rooms where mini-TVs, the size of human torsos, lull them to sleep.

Look how the birches, blackened all night by starlings, shatter when dawn's first sparks touch their beaks. How the last crickets sing through fog hung over pastures pungent now with just-laid manure. In August, the train tracks blaze so hot the rubber on your soles would melt if you walked on them for more than a minute. Despite this heat everything green grows as if in retribution for the barren, cauterized winter, moss so lush between the

wooden rail ties that, at a certain angle of thick, verdant light, it looks like algae, like the glacial flood returned overnight and made us into what we were becoming all along: biblical.

Follow the tracks till they fork off and sink into a path of trampled weeds leading to a junkyard packed with school buses in various stages of amnesia, some so old they're no longer yellow but sit grey as shipwrecks. Furred with ivy, their dented hoods pooled with crisp leaves, they are relics of our mislearning. Walk through this yard—as some have done on their way home from the night shift at the Myers sock factory or just out wandering on Sunday afternoons alone with their minds—and you walk through generations of wanderlust burned between faux-leather seats. At the lot's far edge lies the week-old roadkill, its eye socket filled with warm Coca-Cola, the act of a girl who, bored on her way from school, poured her drink into that finite dark of sightless visions.

If you aim for Gladness and miss, you'll find us. For we are called East Gladness. Gladness itself being no more, renamed to Millsap nearly a century ago after Tony Millsap, the boy who returned from the Great War with no limbs and became a hero—proof you could lose almost all of yourself in this country and still gain a whole town. A handful of us wanted to be East Millsap to soak the shine and fill the stores, but the rest were too proud to name ourselves after a kid whose wheelchair never glided over our sidewalks.

Lasting seven months, winter begins by late September, when the frost glitters on the courthouse lawn and over the hoods of cars banked along the roads. As maples, poplars, and sassafras sway, the light filters amber through their leaving leaves. Even the steeple of the boarded-up Lutheran church grows from dove-white to day-old butter by noon.

Though skeptical, we are not ambivalent to hope. Under all this our main drag glows with its two Irish bars, a diner, a florist, the God First beauty salon, the Panda Gate China Wok, a hole-in-the-wall taco joint with no name, a funeral home painted sky blue to comfort the ravages that lie in its calling, a laundromat whose back entrance leads to a basement housing exactly three coin-operated porn booths. Two doors down is the American Legion, where they sell Saran-wrapped slices of pumpkin bread and black coffee every

Friday under a windblown tarp. There's the migrant farm laborer's law office behind the YMCA, which last year finally had one of its wings converted to a needle exchange. There's the huge Victorian on Lilac and Main. Home to our first mayor, it's now a halfway house for recovering addicts, the walkway lined with polyester roses that poke out blue and violet from snowbanks after blizzards.

There's the two-story Cape on the corner painted only high as the eldest son could reach, then abandoned the winter he joined the Marines, leaving it half olive green for the past seven years. In late July, a black mini-fridge sits by the road, an extension cord running to the house. Inside, rows of blueberries sweat in green paper pints beside a coffee can with a Post-it that reads *Blueberries \$5 Pay What You Can*.

It's a town where high school kids, having nowhere to go on Friday nights, park their stepfathers' trucks in the unlit edges of the Walmart parking lot, drinking Smirnoff out of Poland Spring bottles and blasting Weezer and Lil Wayne until they look down one night to find a baby in their arms and realize they're thirtysomething and the Walmart hasn't changed except for its logo, brighter now, lending a bluish glow to their time-gaunt faces. It's where fathers in blue jeans flecked with wood stain stand at the edges of football fields, watching their sons steam in the reddened dawn, one hand in their pocket, the other gripping a cup of Dunkin' Donuts. They could be statues for what it means to wait for a boy to crush himself into manhood. And each morning you'd sit on the frost-dusted bleachers, a worn copy of *To the Lighthouse* on your lap, and watch the players on the field, blue tomahawks shivering on their jerseys, their plastic pads crackling in the mist. And when you'd turn the page it would slip right off the binding, flutter through the field, gathering inky blotches through the wet grass until it tangles between the boys' legs and disintegrates under a pair of black cleats. The words gone to ground. That town.

Against all odds, we have a library. It used to be an armory that once housed a group of runaway slaves en route to Nova Scotia, cause for the bronze statue of Sojourner Truth at the center fountain, three years now without water. Across from that statue stands the four-foot-eight Lego model

of a red T-Rex, the pieces glued into permanence. It is the height of a boy named Adam Munsey, who, a few feet away, was crushed by the very school bus that was to pick him up, the driver shit-faced on a handle of Southern Comfort after staying up all night to watch the Patriots win the 2002 Super Bowl. Further up, where the street widens into Route 4 and the sidewalk crumbles to dust and patches of northern poppy and blue asters spray over the green to your right, you'll find the Colt factory where the founder, Samuel Colt, became one of the wealthiest men in America, selling revolvers to both sides during the Civil War. Now it's a Coca-Cola plant where polished red trucks line the old brick loading bays as the sun slips behind the mountains in the west.

There's Cumberland Road, which takes you to York County Women's Corrections, lined this time of year with pumpkins that flush the drab fields with stretches of ochre—bounties for jackrabbits and starved possums hoarding for winter. Hugging the river beyond are slabs of sandstone pocked with Podokesaurus footprints, made over 195 million years ago, running right up to the Wendy's parking lot. Then the other franchises: Burger King, AutoZone, Mattress Firm, Family Dollar, Dollar General. Then the Nite-E-Nite Motel with its five babyshit yellow doors facing the Kahoots nightclub across the street, which promises NEW GIRLS EVERY SEVEN MONTHS! Beyond that are the hand-painted signs: BRYON'S INSTA-BAIL, FIREWOOD \$25 OFF YOUR FIRST CORD, NO FRACKING IN THE NAME OF JESUS, a faded MARTHA BEAN FOR 2006 CITY COMPTROLLER. And one in elegant red script that reads, as if in prophecy, GUNS AHEAD.

What do you really know about what you know of New England?

Past the concrete slab where the Citgo once stood, a deer steps cautious into a grove of milkweed, as if the last of its kind, then leaps into the brush where the creek spills into the river flowing under King Philip's Bridge. A freighter bridge named for the Wampanoag chief who led a rebellion here to take back his land from Puritans, its cement abutment loops with colorful graffiti that reads *SpyKids 2*, *Guerra a los ricos*, *Free Mumia Abu-Jamal!!!*, *Laura & Jonny '92*, *niños malos*, and *9/11 was an inside job*.

It is also the last way out of town.

And it's the very bridge the boy crossed one afternoon on September 15 in 2009. Rain pelted the oversize UPS jacket draped over his shoulders as he walked cradled in the heart of the valley, the land sweeping away from him toward boulderous clouds sinking into the horizon. He was nineteen, in the midnight of his childhood and a lifetime from first light. He had not been forgiven and neither are you. The sky a benevolent grey as the afternoon drained to evening and the cold turned his breath to fog. Under his boots the tracks hummed from steady gales slamming the steel straps. Yes, it *is* beautiful here, which is why the ghosts never leave. I need you to know this as the town rinsed to a blur behind him. I need you to understand, as black water churned like chemically softened granite below, the lights coming on one by one along the cobalt banks, that the boy belonged to a cherished portion of this world as he glanced over his shoulder and saw the phone lines sagging with crows resigned to dusk and the red water tower in the distance announcing us—EAST GLADNESS—in faded white paint, before he turned from this place, swung one leg over the rail and decided, like a good son, to jump.

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Though it was true the boy had run out of paths to take, out of ways to salvage his failures, he never planned on jumping off King Philip's Bridge that evening. It was only when he glimpsed, between the rail ties, the river swirling so massive below, a place you could slip cleanly into, that something in him both jolted and withered at once. They would say he drowned, of course, like that sophomore from Hebron they fetched from the shallows last summer, who got wasted at a house party and waded out past midnight singing to himself, only to wash ashore the next morning dressed in everything but his shoes. There was no shame, the boy thought, in losing yourself to something as natural as gravity—where one doesn't *jump* but is pulled, blameless, toward the sea. If nothing else, this would hurt his mother least.

But once he raised his leg and lifted himself over the railing, he spotted the second platform below, jutting far enough to make the leap impossible. He paused, stared across the swirling valley charred by the gloam, and glimpsed the spot where the river turned toward Chester County, where the towns are so small you could light a cigarette as you drive in and be someplace else before you blow your first drag out the window. He sucked in a breath, let it mist over him, then toed his way to the lower platform, where he thumbed off his pack until a mute white splash winked below and it was gone. Grasping the steel cables, he inched himself toward the bridge's center, where the fall would be highest, the current below churning through the metal beams.

A few yards in, he paused. The bridge was over a hundred feet tall, he knew, from a field trip back in middle school. It was once the town's most prized achievement, meant to bring passenger trains and money into the heart

of Main Street. But the trains never stopped, passing the town on their way to Boston, Providence, Buffalo, Portland, even Montreal. Now only the freighters cut through, carrying strapped lumber or barrels of grain from Ontario. The bridge was painted bright yellow to signal this errant optimism, the color gone now save for a few bolts buried deep enough in the beams to be spared from weather.

Streetlights had come on over the mud shelves hugging the bank, giving the water the brushstroked glow of sunlight touching wet pavement on summer mornings—the kind of light you’d see nowhere else. “Sorry,” he whispered to no one over the rush as the wires slickened under his palms. The rain, pouring steady for three days, drenched his hair and ran cold down his neck. The girl back at New Hope had mentioned, without him asking, that if you dive after breaking the surface and rush to touch the river bottom, it’ll be enough, that the rapids will drag you forward and all you have to do is close your eyes until the icy water grows warm and quiet in your lungs and your pineal gland floods your brain with DMT and before you know it you’re flying in a clear, windless sky, free from the human cage of your body.

What she didn’t mention was that when you come up to the edge, there’ll be another edge, inside you, one that’s both passable and insurmountable at once. He swallowed hard and looked down at his boot wobbling over the beam. That’s when he saw the corpse floating toward him, its limbs stretched and opaque beneath the river’s surface. The face staring skyward with shut eyes and its clothes billowing from the thin frame. He gasped and wiped the rain from his eyes with both hands and looked again, blinking. But it was still there, clearer even. He hid his face in his sleeve and clung fast to the wire when a voice called out from somewhere across the water. He thought it came from his own head until he heard it again. “Come back. Come back now! Jesus Mother Mary, not now, not today.”

He searched the bluffs and saw, set on the riverbank, a two-story clapboard house leaning toward the river. Attached to it was a wrought iron fire escape where a woman was waving her arms about, fighting with some sort of laundry line. He glanced back at the water and realized it wasn’t a corpse at all but a bedsheet twisting through the current. A blast of wind

ripped another sheet out of her arms and carried it a ways before it wilted around a nearby maple.

“Hey, your blankets!” he shouted from instinct, and quickly regretted it. He stepped back under the beam’s shadow, making himself small. But too late.

The woman stopped, leaned over, and squinted at the bridge. Her glasses, reflecting the nearby streetlamp, flickered gold. From her shoulder-length white hair and stooped gait, she seemed elderly.

“Who’s there?” She shielded her eyes and called through the rain suturing around her. The boy pressed himself against the struts, a steel bolt digging between his shoulders, and kept still.

“My goodness!” she gasped, eyes wide. “What are you doing? You crazy or what? Father in heaven help us. Get the hell out of there!”

Shivering, he leaned into the cone of light, somehow more troubled that a stranger had caught him on the edge of his life than by his own impulse to end it. “It’s not what you think,” he yelled back. “I was—I was just studying the water.” He pulled back his hood and offered her, like a caught criminal, his boned face, pale as a newt’s and framed by a black bowl cut, a girlish but useless tenderness softening his eyes. It was pitiful, being found like this. What kind of idiot puts himself, on a whim, under a bridge and must now convince an old woman that it was all—what, exactly?

“Don’t be stupid.” She glanced around and pushed her glasses up with her middle finger. “You can’t die in front of my house, okay? I don’t need any more spirits around here.” She made the sign of the cross and gripped the railing as a slew of foreign words droned out of her. Her sheets had all blown away save for one blue towel whipping beside her face.

“Okay, okay! Listen.” He held out his hand as if they were steps from each other and not halfway across a river. “I’m not gonna do it. I promise. I... I’m just inspecting the bridge. I’m a student—and wanna be an engineer one day.” By now his lies came so easily, they rolled off his tongue like train cars heading off a cliff.

“Just get the hell down. I’m serious. Or I call the police.”

“Okay, alright. Relax.” Gently, he scooted across the beam toward her side of the bank. The woman disappeared into the house, then stuck her head out the next window closer to him, tracking him as he went. At one point his boot juddered over a rivet and she yelped, cursing in her native tongue.

“Put your foot over there. No, there.” She was halfway out the window, pointing to a spot he couldn’t see. “Now move to the left. Yes, wait—that other left. Good. There’s a ladder over there. Go to it and climb. Climb, boy. Hurry.” She jabbed her thumb at the sky. “Up, up! That’s it.”

He footed toward a metal ladder soldered to the bridge and pulled himself, arms jumping from cold, back to track level, then leaned over the rail and gathered his breath. “Thank you, okay?” He waved the woman off. “It’s all good. I just wanted to see the girders up close. I’m heading home now, don’t worry.”

“Bullshit! You wanna die. Come over here.” She pointed with her chin toward the shore. “Get over here or you can explain it to the cops. You think I’m kidding?” Her hair was matted from the downpour and a ring of water had darkened the collar of her gown.

The boy rose and scuffed across the bridge as she followed him from window to window, muttering to herself. When the dirt embankment appeared under the platform, he hopped over the rail and hurried toward the house. The street was flanked on both sides by shambled row houses that resembled a set from a war movie. Through the exposed walls, where pink insulation had spilled out, he glimpsed into moldy, moss-lined living rooms. One house was half burnt, its interior filled with grimy clumps of furniture where a young tree had taken root through the floorboards, its top branches clawing a gash in the second floor.

The woman’s house was on the river’s side, her back door just yards from the water. Through the decades, it had acquired the hues of the riverbank itself, slate grey and beige-speckled, the paint on the clapboard long stripped. As he reached the front steps, the main door opened and a shock of white hair poked above the screen door’s frame. She was struggling with the lock, so he gave the handle a yank and the door flew open, revealing a woman who must’ve been at least eighty. She was tall as his eyes, had a square jaw and a

bulbous nose under wire-rimmed glasses that covered her entire face save for a chin that resembled the end of a dinner roll.

His own tortoise frames were beaded with rain, and he saw her as only a smear of beige colors. They watched each other a moment, the dark settling around them as he swayed on his feet.

“I’m sorry,” the boy said again, dripping. “I’m not gonna jump off that bridge no more, okay? I promise. Can I go now?”

• • •

“**COME IN.** But take off your shoes. My husband put down these floors.” The woman disappeared into the house. The boy hesitated, looking down the empty street. The rain was picking up again. He stepped onto the porch, water running off him in rivulets, took off his boots, and followed her inside.

A creaky rail house built by freight workers over a century ago, the home was one large hallway divided into three rooms: a parlor, a dining room, and a kitchen, whose dim light now glowed at the far end like the hearth of an ancient cave. Furnished in a style the boy had seen only in the black-and-white TV series *Lassie*, whose reruns he watched on a three-channel Panasonic as a kid, the house had the stuffy odor of rooms whose windows rarely opened undercut with the mildewy rank of crawl spaces. As his eyes adjusted, amorphous furniture upholstered in sprawling pale florals came to view. The walls were wood-paneled and adorned with cheap landscape paintings in gilded frames. As he passed the transom that divided the parlor from the dining room, he looked up and saw what was once a white cross, now phantom-grey from decades of dust. On one wall, lit by streetlights, a cluster of grim-faced portraits stared out from an era he couldn’t locate. He paused at the kitchen’s threshold, water falling from his chin and hair on the laminate floor.

The woman sat down at a small table and nodded toward an empty chair. “Go on, sit. You look like a dunked cookie.”

He sat carefully, his eyes taking in the room. Not knowing what to do with his hands, the boy placed them, palms up, on the table but withdrew

them to his lap when he realized this looked psychotic.

“Here, dry yourself.” She handed him a dish towel. It smelled of raw onions but he wiped his face anyway, his eyes quickly stinging.

“Poor kid,” she mumbled to herself. “Hey, it’s all over now, okay? Whatever happened is over. But don’t you cry, boy. Tears deplete your iron, you know.” She grabbed the rag, leaned over and dabbed his eyes some more, deepening the burn. He winced and turned away. “Okay, you’re not a boy. You’re a man and don’t need nobody to wipe your tears.”

The kitchen was the size of a large shed and contained a stovetop browned with grime-stuck grease, a sink, and a portion of countertop the size of a cutting board. They sat at a round table covered in plaid plastic meant to look like picnic cloth. From its center, a fabric-shaded lamp trimmed with tulle emitted a sickly amber glow.

She grabbed a nearby pack of cigarettes, a brand he didn’t recognize, slipped one between her lips, and put a lighter to it. “I normally don’t smoke.” She took a drag and stared at him, not unkindly, then leaned over and pushed aside a large stack of magazines. They were decades old and printed in a language he couldn’t make out.

“Lithuanian,” she said, clocking his curiosity. “Know what that is?”

He shook his head, wiping the onion tears from his cheeks.

“An old country, far away, where I was born.” She waved the cigarette about and took a drag. “But all countries are old, if you think about it.”

But he had never thought about it. He had rarely thought about any country, least of all the one *he* was born in—only that it, too, was far away.

“Want one?” She handed him a cigarette.

Before he could answer she placed it in his mouth and lit it.

“You like my owls?” She pointed over her shoulder where an armoire loomed behind her. Behind its glass doors was a fleet of owl figurines of many shapes and sizes, some porcelain and shining, others the matte of wood or clay. “Every owl was made in a free country. None of my owls,” she leaned back, “came from Communists. Understand?”

He lied by nodding.

Above the armoire were three paintings of owl portraits, their faces bloated as old mobsters, each one depicting, like a Rembrandt study, a new angle to the bird's face. In fact, owl knickknacks, tchotchkes, and icons stared at him from nearly every surface. "I collect them. Don't know why really," she shrugged. "People started giving them to me long ago. Now it's my calling card." She smiled weakly through the smoke. "What's your name anyway?"

"Thanks for this." The boy took a long drag from the bogie. "But I should go."

"Easy, little lamb. I invite you in my home, give you cigarette. And look," she tilted the pack to show him, "I only have two left. I even let you cry in my kitchen. You know it's bad luck to cry in the kitchen, right? You can at least tell me your name."

He stared at the plastic coverlet on the table pocked with holes and considered the name his mother gave him, the thought of it sinking him. It wasn't that he didn't like his name—only that he had been willing to toss it in the river. He had never wanted to throw his name out, just the breath attached to it. The name, after all, was the only thing his mother gave him that he was able to keep without destroying.

"Hai," he mumbled.

"And *hello* to you too. But—"

"No, Hai. It's—"

"Okay," she breathed, "but *who* am I saying hello to?"

"My name is Hai."

"Your name is Hello?"

He decided to nod. "Sure."

"Ah." She brightened and pointed a crooked finger at him. "So your name is Labas!"

"What?"

"Labas means 'hello' in my country." She extended her hand across the table for him to shake. "Hello, Labas. I'm Grazina. Means 'beautiful.'" She grinned, the cigarette smoldering through her yellow teeth.

He shook her hand, cracked dry and warm. "Hello."

“Now we know who’s who. So, you were delivering packages and decided that today’s the day you had enough, huh? That what they mean when they say you guys *go postal*?”

Hai looked down at his UPS jacket. “Oh,” he said. “No, a friend gave me this. I don’t deliver anything. But I’m sorry about your sheets.”

“Ack.” She waved him off. “You live long as I do and everything’s a rag.”

He stared out the window at the bridge where he’d stood only a half hour ago. Now dark, its row of lights stretched to the other side. “I’m sorry again for all the trouble. But I’m okay now, really.”

“Don’t be sorry. Living all these years next to a bridge, you see crazy things on it. One time, on Christmas morning, a whole container of chickens tipped over as the train crossed, the top rows falling over the sides. Poor things. They drowned in their cages. But some got loose and swam. Can you believe chickens can swim? Beats being eaten, no?” She let herself laugh. “But I’m glad that you, Mr. Hello, you didn’t become another chicken, huh?”

Just then something flickered in her expression and she stopped, her eyes drifting to a spot just over his shoulder. He turned around but found only an old Frigidaire plastered with coupon cutouts, their edges browned and curled. Something about Grazina was off, he realized now. There was a twinkle in her eye that held without pause as they spoke, as if lit by an artificial source. “Labas,” she leaned forward and said in a hushed tone, “you want to know the secret to getting rid of every sorrow known to man? Do you?”

He blinked at her.

“I’m serious. Here—grab those dinner rolls hanging behind you and follow me. Go on, they don’t bite.”

She crossed the kitchen and opened a back door he hadn’t noticed before. Rain flew in and broke as mist across the room. Beyond it the river roared up from the banks. “Come, boy,” she called from outside. “I’ll show you what I mean.”

He took the bag of rolls and stepped out, the sound of water filling his empty head. He considered making a beeline across the yard and running for it, but his feet wouldn’t budge. The backyard was a plot of dirt flecked with tufts of grass drenched in mud. Twenty feet away, over a concrete

embankment crumbling at the lip, ran the river. It was nightfall but the yard was lit weakly by sodium lamps from the street. Grazina hobbled toward the center of the plot, swaying as the wind tugged at her gown, and waved him over.

“What you gonna do with these out here?”

“Just come and put the rolls down. No, open them first. Good, now just dump them.”

“What?”

“Just dump them out,” she shouted over the river.

He flipped the bag over and about a dozen rolls fell onto the mud.

“You ready?” she said.

Before he could answer she stomped on one of the rolls, flattening it. Then she did the same with another, this time twisting the toe of her slipper, grinding the roll in the ground so the crumbs broke off and disintegrated. “Isn’t that wonderful? Now you try, Labas.” Her face flushed with delight, she grabbed his hand and pulled him toward her. “Go on, step on one. Trust me.”

He pressed a socked foot on a roll, nudging it with his toe.

“For Chrissakes, it’s not roadkill. Go ahead and step on it. Good. Now go stronger.” Her hands were on her knees, urging him like a deranged coach. “That’s it! Yes, with all your weight. Crush those bastards.” She grabbed his ankle with both hands and pressed his foot onto the roll. When he lifted his foot, the bread was sunken in the mud, the sock fabric waffling the wet dough. “Don’t think about it, just do another. Isn’t this fun?”

He crushed another roll, then another as Grazina cheered, her voice cut with childish glee. Before long they were stepping from roll to roll, going in circles. “Anytime I feel my soul going dim,” she panted, “I just step on some rolls and it’s like a magic spell.”

He pushed his heel into one of the last rolls, then dragged it in a wide arc through the dirt, the crumbs sloughing off, leaving a powdery comet shooting across the mud as Grazina clapped and shouted in Lithuanian.

All around them the bread browned and sopped into pale lumps as they went on stepping. From far away, across the river passing in your car, you would’ve seen two people dancing in a rainstorm in a cone of light on a

Connecticut night at the end of the first decade of the century, and forgotten that the country was at war. Hai's laughter, which sounded far away and foreign to him, faded as he caught his breath. There was something to this after all, he conceded.

Grazina patted his back, her spectacles white with rain. "You did it, Labas. You're a natural bread crusher. Before, in Lithuania, bread was precious. We had to eat even hard, moldy bread, green bread that tasted like gasoline. Now we can crush them anytime we like," she made a fist at the word *crush*, "and no one can punish us. But come, come here. We must pray now, boy..." She leaned in and gripped his shoulder. "May the Lord forgive us this sin of wastefulness," she began, her voice wobbling with her balance, "may He also watch over the strangers and uphold the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked He brings to ruin. For the Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."

He watched her as she prayed, this bent stub of a woman, hair matted at her temples, whose voice had earlier coaxed him back to solid ground.

"How do you feel, Labas?" Around them was a circle of decimated bread.

"I feel beautiful," he nodded, refreshed by this bewildering new realm he had entered. "I feel Grazina."

• • •

HE WOKE TO the train whistle blowing across the river and knew it was morning. When he spotted his UPS jacket hanging on the wall, a puddle collecting beneath it, last night's events resurfaced. After they'd crushed the bread rolls in the rain, Grazina had offered him, over tea, a spare room to wait out the storm for the night, and he gratefully accepted. But after sinking into a deep, dreamless sleep, he woke in the wee hours to the sound of someone singing. Clear, pristine, lilted singing, like a voice coming up from a cavernous well. Groggy, he glanced around the room and saw, in the half dark, the wooden owl figurine on the desk and realized where he was. He pulled the covers back, left the room, and tiptoed down the carpeted hall

before stopping at Grazina's door. It was only when he lowered his ear to the door that he recognized the melody to "Silent Night." He held his breath. Her voice was hollowed out and girlishly high, not the grate of an Eastern European sailor he'd heard earlier. He gave the door a push until, through the widening crack, he saw Grazina lying stock-still and staring at the ceiling, her wide-open eyes catching the wet light from the window as her mouth worked the lyrics through the chorus. He stood staring a moment, feeling both terrified and like a creep at once. "Grazina," he managed, but she kept singing, not that he'd know what to do if she woke. He shuddered, eased the door closed, then hurried to his room and pulled the covers over his head. He didn't know how long it took before her voice dimmed, but eventually it did and he drifted off.

He was lying now in the dusty morning light, collecting himself, when a frying pan started hissing downstairs, followed by the clang of pots. He went over to where his jacket hung and ran a finger down its arm, his attention lingering on the stitching. The jacket once belonged to his friend Noah, a boy he met working tobacco when he was fourteen, the crop blooming verdant along the river that carved East Gladness in half. His real name wasn't Noah, but that's what Hai started calling him a week after he died. Because why shouldn't the dead receive new names? Weren't they transformed, after all, into a kind of otherhood? Like many boys throughout the county, the wide green valley swallowed Noah up and spat out a tombstone the height of a shoebox at Cedar Hill, high enough to hold his name and nothing else. It was one of those friendships that came on quick, like the heat on a July day, and long after midnight you could still feel its sticky film on your skin as you lie awake in your room, the fan blowing in what remained of the scorched hours, and realize for the first time in your peep of a life that no one is ever truly alone. It'd been two years since Noah's pine box was hammered shut, and nearly every day since, the UPS jacket draped over Hai's bony shoulders, sometimes even in bed on especially cold nights, the leather torn in places and the *U* nearly peeled off. But skin is skin, he told himself, even when it's not yours.

He dressed and laced his boots, then reached into the jacket's inner pocket. Under the crushed pack of Marlboros, gum wrappers, a few coins, he found the contact lens case, held it to his ear and shook, listening for the pills, then slipped it in his pocket before heading downstairs.

• • •

A SINGLE PERFECTLY browned latke slid onto his plate, leaving a trail of oil over the stoneware dish painted with faceless angels circling the rim. Grazina placed one on her own plate, then dropped the pan in the sink with a hush of steam.

“That’s my great-aunt.” She pointed with her chin to a daguerreotype on the wall of a scowling woman in a headscarf.

“She looks nice,” Hai said.

“She had a humpback and a heart of gold. But her husband was the devil himself, poor Agne. Where are your people?” She closed the fridge with her hip. They had been filling the space with small talk since he came down, but he now sensed a change in her voice.

“I don’t got any people. Just my mom across the river. But I can’t see her now.”

“A son and a mother. That’s people enough, no? Why can’t you see her?” She placed a bowl of baby carrots before him and sat down fiddling with the table cover. “Probably none of my business.”

“I messed up some things, that’s all.”

“Like your glasses?” She chuckled at the broken corner of his tortoise glasses, wrapped with duct tape.

“One of many casualties, yeah.” It had broken back at New Hope during a scuffle he wasn’t even a part of.

She looked him up and down, eyes cautious, then lifted an owl-painted teapot and filled their mugs. He drank and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He’d never used a saucer before and found the clack that punctuated each sip oddly satisfying. “I heard you singing that Christmas song last night,”

he said, trying to sound casual. “Think it was ‘Silent Night.’ You have a great voice.”

She shot him a puzzled look. “Don’t be silly, Labas. I’m no singer. When I was little I was in the church choir, but then they snipped my tonsils and that was that—kaput. If anyone was singing, I’d hear it. I have good ears.” She tugged on one ear. “Like rubber, from my father. Must be those coyotes across the marshes.” She nodded across the street. “They go crazy when it rains.”

Surely he hadn’t dreamt it all up—though the man at New Hope did warn him about having nightmares once he got back to the real world.

She gestured at the bowl of raw carrots. “Those are for you. Eat up.”

Hai took a bite from a carrot, then picked up his fork, eager to try the latke.

“No, eat the carrot first. Please.” She leaned forward, knife and fork on each side of the plate, a paper towel tucked in her collar. “It’s important.”

He finished the carrot, then picked another from the bowl and put the whole thing in his mouth.

“They’re good for you, believe me.” She cut into her latke like it was a steak and ate.

“For the eyes, right?”

“That’s a lie the army told in World War Two to hide the fact that they used top-notch radar. Carrots,” she paused for effect, “give you the will to live.”

He took a bite of the latke, which was perfectly made, crispy at the edges and delicately salted with a touch of herbs he couldn’t name. “What do you mean?” he said, chewing.

“It’s a root. And roots prevent you from getting the blues.” She picked one from the bowl; it gleamed under the kitchen light. “You see, carrots become bright orange because it’s so dark in the ground. They make their own light because the sun never reaches that far—like those fish in the ocean who glow from nothing? So when you eat it, you take in the carrot’s will to go upward. To heaven.” She tucked the carrot back in the bowl, gently, as if it were a tiny

person. “Ever heard of a rabbit jumping off a bridge?” she winked. “Of course not. That’s because they have the light in them.”

He had never heard this before, but somehow it made sense.

“When *I* get the blues, mostly in February, I boil a pot of these and dip them in honey. When my husband died, I ate nothing but carrots for six months straight, and you know what?” She pointed the butter knife at her eye. “Not a single tear. They’re stronger raw, but I lost my molars in ’91. Bush Senior, what can you do?”

“When did he die, your husband?”

“When does anybody die?” she shrugged. “When God says *Well done.*”

By the time the tea was down to its dregs, Grazina grew quiet. Something in the kitchen was ticking. Their eyes met and she looked away, then back at him, on the verge of saying something—but mumbled to herself in Lithuanian, shaking her head. He poured more tea to fill the silence. The kitchen, he realized, was only bright when the back door was opened. Closed now, the place was dim and hourless as a bunker.

“Now,” she cleaned her teeth with her tongue, “the place is old and falling apart but there’s plenty of heat from the oil boiler, which gets filled every second Friday. There’s a leak in the bathroom ceiling but it goes right into the tub, so who cares, right?” She shrugged. “There’s no washer or dryer, but you can do it in the tub and hang it on the clothesline. And you’ll need to help with fetching the groceries, set the mouse trap, and toss the occasional poor bastard in the river.”

“Hold up.” He set his cup down. “What are you talking about?”

“You don’t gotta pay no rent and you can have my daughter Lina’s old room. Where you slept last night. I’m not difficult. I just need help taking my vitamins. And just...” She fingered the magazines on the table. “It would be nice to have someone around. I’m eighty-two this year, you know, and...” She trailed off, looking down and away.

“You want me to stay here?” He scanned her face, then the owls behind her.

She held up her hand. “Just listen first, okay?” She went on to tell him about this live-in nurse named Janet who was covered by Medicare. Janet was

assigned to Grazina after she'd fallen halfway down the stairs and ended up in the ER at Hartford Hospital. But then Janet got married to some biker, hopped on a Harley, and floored it to New Mexico, never to be seen again. Grazina was put on a waiting list for another live-in nurse, which, in these parts, could take months, sometimes years.

Hubbard Street, Grazina went on, was known locally as the Devil's Armpit due to a massive metam sodium spill from a shipping barge coming down from Buffalo back in '88. The toxic sludge had leached into the soil, and then the pipes, so badly the city paid the residents to relocate. Within a year only squatters burning bonfires in ravaged living rooms remained. The Army Corps of Engineers started demolishing houses but left after an electrical fire broke out, exposing asbestos in the walls. They never came back. Homeless camps popped up along the banks through the years, but the land was too cold and blighted for them to last. Grazina and her husband refused to leave, opting to keep their two-story biohazard teetering toward the river. "Our lives are here. I was married in that living room for Chrissakes. How could we leave?" She threw up her hands. "Anyway, a new nurse came—this was right after Janet—I see her car come up the road there, then it stops. She makes a call on her little phone before turning around and zooming right out of here. I never saw her again. No one wants to live in this dump with an old lady. Now I'm back on the list, this time who knows how long." She rested her arms on the table and leaned forward, her tone softening. "Look, if you really have no place to go, like you said, then you can stay long as you need. To get yourself together. But I'm not asking to be a charity case, capisce? I've made it by myself long enough. And you still have your mother, yes? Maybe you need to go to her and make things right." She took a sip of tea, watching him over the mug's lip. "A son should make peace with his mother before anything else."

He listened, his head tilted with the weight of her offer. But even before she finished, he knew he'd say yes. After all, he had never refused anything given him without a price, which was how he ended up where he was in the first place.

“You wouldn’t want to live with a kooky owl lady, would you?” She chuckled nervously.

The chair creaked as he leaned back, blinking. “You sure about this?”

She nodded over her glasses.

He reached out and held her hand, surprised by his own relief. “But just to get back on my feet, yeah? Then I’ll be out of your hair.”

How he would pull this off, there was no telling—but it was a narrow passage worth taking, a feeble tributary that should at least end up somewhere.

Grazina lowered her head, her hair falling across his arms and onto the greasy plate. When she lifted her face, her glasses were askew and her eyes full. “We’ll make a good team, right? We’ll make do with what the Lord gives us.” She exhaled and lit her last two cigarettes, handing him one. “You believe in God, boy?”

He took a long drag and considered this. “He’s probably around sometimes.”

“Clearly not as much as the devil,” she cackled, her missing front tooth winking behind the smoke.

Before long, the days grew to weeks and the two strangers found a steady rhythm at 16 Hubbard Street. Hai's main task was to make sure Grazina took her vitamins, like she said, except these "vitamins" turned out to be in a plastic trough filled with prescription bottles. "For my brains," she said, pointing to her head.

The trough was a mess, pharmacy bags with faded print, crumpled paper stuck together by half-melted cough drops, brown-edged receipts, and empty bottles tossed among filled ones. Hai sorted the scripts and allocated the pills into a pink organizer tray labeled with the days of the week. This meant knowing the shapes and sizes of each of the thirteen pills by heart. Every day she had to take three gabapentin for nerve pain in her back, one Lipitor for cholesterol, a Zoloft, two Aricept and two Namenda for cognition, one paroxetine, an antidepressant that also curbed hallucinations, two lisinopril for blood pressure, and a calcium tablet with breakfast.

From patient reports pulled from a manila folder in the armoire drawer, he learned Grazina was diagnosed with mid-stage frontal lobe dementia in the summer of 2004—nearly five years ago. He also learned that missing one dose of Aricept risked the possibility of a "classic attack": confused timelines, aggravation, paranoia, delusions of grandeur, and even unfounded, sudden rage.

Still, they went through those first weeks, soaked in the listless hours, stitching together a kind of life. Like most people, they spent their days watching cable TV in the parlor. Grazina especially loved *The Office*, even if she often mistook it for the news, the close-up interview sessions with suit-and-tie characters resembling special reports. She'd turn to Hai after a while and say, "When they gonna show us the weather, Labas?" Another time,

during *The Price Is Right*, while they were guessing the price of a bookcase, she went on listing the names of home furnishing items that he, having grown up in public housing with furniture donated by the Salvation Army, never heard of. “Plush down settee, \$90; oak-white credenza, \$145; hand-carved wood divan, \$340.” She went on and on as if reciting prayers on a rosary, even through the commercial break.

Sometimes, to be sure her mind was working the way it should, he’d check on her by asking who the president was. It was the question he asked his own grandmother, his bà ngoại, dead years now, whenever she had one of her schizophrenic fits. He’d be running the bathtub for their laundry and, realizing Grazina had been quiet a little too long, would stop the water, walk to the staircase, and shout, “Grazina! Who’s the president?”

“Jesus Christ!” she’d shout up, annoyed. “Obama!”

“Okay, good. Thank you.”

Other tasks included a couple runs a week to the packy across the bridge for groceries. The first time he went she watched him from the window as he crossed the rail bridge in case he was tempted to do anything stupid again. Her preferred meal was the Salisbury steak frozen dinner made by Stouffer’s, the one that came with a tiny puddle of a brownie that congealed during the third minute in the microwave. Her EBT card had enough for them to have Stouffer’s about three times a week. He wondered what he looked like running across the bridge with a black garbage bag of frozen dinners over his shoulder while some old lady yelled from her window every few minutes that the coast was clear of oncoming trains. His own vice was Pop-Tarts, which he bought in a forty-eight-count box and stored in his room to be eaten untoasted and dipped in instant coffee.

By the second week, he got better at reading her body language, even shifts in her voice. If she started to talk to the painting of the Virgin Mary hung in the dining room, for example, or if she suddenly decided to wander around the house, putting owl figurines in her pockets, they would take the next dose early. He also showed her how to use the microwave and fix the antennae on the old RCA when it went out, teaching her the buttons on the remote, all of which she’d forget by the time the evening news came on. The

mind in dementia, Hai learned, can be like one of those Etch A Sketch things he had as a kid: a little shake and it vanishes to a grey and otherworldly blankness. Or worse, when it draws things on its own to fill the gaps, like the time, a few days in, when he woke to the sound of animated talking downstairs. It was 4:53 a.m. according to his Nokia flip phone. He came down in his boxers, the house blue and chilled by the early hour, and found Grazina sitting in the kitchen having a conversation with a pushed-in chair. Seeing him, she pointed to the seat and said, “Labas, why don’t you be a good host and make some tea for this nice little girl. She came all the way from Schenectady, can you believe it?”

Quietly freaking out, he ushered Grazina back to bed. “Come back when your father feels better, Anna,” she called over her shoulder as he flicked off the light.

Another time he came downstairs after a shower and saw six trays of freshly baked stuffed cabbages cooling on every surface in the tiny kitchen, Grazina slumped in the chair facing the window, sweating and breathing heavily. “Labas, what’s happening?” she said without looking up, scared of herself. “What did I do?”

“You hungry or something?” he asked stupidly.

“It’s Lina, my daughter. She called,” she wrung her hands, “said she’ll be over for dinner. Said she finally put down the bottle and now has her appetite again. Did I make enough? She’s smart girl.” She peered sheepishly at Hai. “An ESL teacher, you know. Out in Pleasanton, Texas.”

“And she came all this way just to have your cabbages? She must miss you so much.”

Grazina nodded. “That’s her over there.” She pointed at the armoire where, in the crowd of owl figurines, sat a sepia photo of a grinning ponytailed girl. “She won the fifth-grade spelling bee that day.”

Hai put his hand on her shoulder and let it stay until her breath steadied. He helped her clean up, putting the cabbages in whatever Tupperware he could find and shoving them all in the fridge and freezer. Then he took her hand in his, a trick he did with his bà ngoại. Whenever she would see a snake slither from the ceiling or rise from a crack in the tiles between her feet, he’d

take her hand and scratch the inside of her palm with his fingernails until the snake crawled back into the fissure in her mind, the ground sealing up like a sutured gash. With Hai scratching her palm, Grazina eventually settled, and they both climbed the stairs, one step at a time. “Lina will come by noon,” he said at last.

She faced him, her face halved by the bridge lights, and said flatly, “No she won’t. She never comes, that drunk.”

• • •

HE WAS READING *Slaughterhouse-Five* one morning during breakfast, a copy of which he found wedged in the desk drawer in his bedroom. It turned out Grazina’s husband left it there while working on translating the book into Lithuanian, a project he spent over a decade on and ultimately left unfinished.

Grazina put down her spring ’92 issue of *Town & Country*. “Labas, read me the opening, please.”

She stared out the window as he read the first few paragraphs from the story of a man wandering the warscape of his mind after the wars of his body. When he finished, she looked at him from beneath her glasses and said only, “Very well, then. Very well.” He was about to say something about the book when the cuckoo clock on the wall behind him went off, the wooden owl shooting out to nod along to a jagged tune spinning in its broken gears. Her eyes lit up. “Ah, 6:43, the hour Vilnius fell to Stalin.” She crossed herself, shut her eyes, and said a prayer under her breath.

It was in these moments that he thought this new life, if you could call it that, wasn’t so bad. That he could bide his time until something ahead of him lifted, like the mist rising each morning above the river outside his window, revealing what was always there. But he was wrong.

One day Hai came upon a bottle, from a different pharmacy, lying dusty at the bottom of a kitchen drawer among old batteries and expired coupons. He held it up until the light revealed the label and his hopes—hopes he had all along, though hidden even from himself—were realized. No, they weren’t codeine or oxys, not even a slow-release Percocet, which could have been

crushed and snorted, but a sixty-tablet supply of Dilaudid, half full and made out to her husband, Jonas. It had expired on March 16, 2006, but beggars can't be choosers. Grazina came up to him and peered over her glasses at the bottle. "Oh yes. That was for his hernia surgery," she sighed. "He was so happy to ride his bike again after. He loved riding his bike, Jonas."

As soon as she turned away, he pocketed the bottle. If there was one, there would be others.

• • •

THAT NIGHT IT RAINED IN TORRENTS, pummeling the second-story windows of the house and casting warped shadows into the room where Hai lay blinking on the floor mattress. Lightning flashed the oak outside, its twisted branches rinsed white as bands of water rolled over the roof and into the gutters, dumping onto the gravel drive below. It was after the second thunderclap, which slammed so hard he felt it ricochet through the mattress springs, that Grazina began to scream.

A sound like someone falling through air without ever touching ground, her voice pierced the thin walls with the hellish mix of a yodel and a howl. Hai hugged his knees to his chest, hoping she'd fall back to sleep. He had known this was coming, the night when all the medicines, the many pills designed in pharmaceutical labs in Indiana and produced in China, would fail them. And yet he was not prepared for this vast, untenable stretch of the mind's vacuous caverns.

After a lull in the thunder, she wailed again, this time louder. The glass knob on her door started jostling, and soon she was shuffling down the hall toward his room, her soles dragging heavy on the hardwood. Outside his door she paused, her breaths hoarse against the hollowed wood. As he put his fist to his teeth to steady himself, the door opened and her stout shadow collapsed beside the mattress. He smelled cooked onions mixed with the peppermint oil she used on her hair before bed. Grazina grunted from the impact and struggled against the floor. He threw off his covers and crouched beside her. Another flash threw the oak's shadow into the room and he made out a tuft of

hair on the back of her head. He called to her and grabbed her forearm, slick as a branch pulled from a summer pond. Across the road, the coyotes, spooked by the storm, shrieked against the night.

“Hey, hey. You with me? What’s going on?” He shook her shoulders and thought he saw her nod. “Alright, easy now. Who’s the president? Who’s the president?”

She muttered a few gnarled words, eyes wild in her sockets. He spoke into her opened mouth as if into a well, each syllable a knot on a rope sent down for her to grab. But her brain, like his grandmother’s, had ejected her far away from where they were sitting.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “You gotta try in English, okay?”

She pulled on his neck and planted her mouth to his ear—but only slurred in more Lithuanian.

“No, English,” he coaxed. “America, you got it?”

Finally she blinked and shook her head, dislodging one language to make room for another. “My brother,” she cried in English. “Get him out, please.” She pulled on his shirt collar, tearing it. “Please, sir. My baby brother. He’s still inside.” She pointed at something a few feet away, the darkness immediately swallowing her arm. A faint glow from the streets illuminated her face, green eyes clear and wide, fixed on a spot ahead of them.

“That’s just a desk,” he pleaded. “Come on.”

“No. It’s Kristof.” She lunged forward. “I can see his legs.”

“I promise you we’re the only ones here.” He wrapped his arms around her waist and positioned himself to block whatever horror she was seeing. “Your body’s right here, in 2009. You just have to step into it, alright? Can you step into it?” He shook her, hoping to loosen her brother from her vision, but she pressed on, tears and snot dripping down her chin. He wiped her face with his shirt only to smear it more, leaving a gash of mucus reflecting the dim light across her cheek.

In the commotion, her flowered nightgown had slipped off her collarbones, revealing her breast. With her neck heavy under his right arm, it was impossible to reach the hem of her gown. Using his free hand, he pulled the nightgown over her, cinching each end together with thumb and forefinger

before sliding the button through the eyelet, which caught on the third try. “Sorry,” he whispered. Another thunderclap rocked the house and they both ducked, Grazina covering her head with both hands. Shaking, rachitic, she clung to his shirt and kept begging him to rescue her brother. His charred arm, she explained, was poking out from a pile of rubble beside the upturned bread van, her wet eyelids blinking rapidly as the memory flickered behind them.

“It’s just a bad dream,” he offered. “I promise.” He tried rubbing her arms, but she clawed his hands away. As a last resort, he closed his eyes and rocked back and forth, slowly, his brow pinched in concentration as he cradled her. His voice was wobbly at first, but soon he found the notes to the folk song his grandmother would sing him when he’d wake from a nightmare on hot summer nights, asthmatic and delirious. “Chiều đi lên đồi cao, hát trên những xác người,” he tried. “Tôi đã thấy, tôi đã thấy bên khu vườn / Một người mẹ ôm xác đứa con.” Soon his voice grew stronger, enough to feel its vibration through Grazina’s shoulders as he ushered into the room the feeble melody from a country he could barely point to on a map.

Before long, to his surprise, her bones unbuckled from their stiff joints, and he could feel her returning to herself. Her clutch softened around his neck as he sang on, his mouth barely open, as though a single false note would cripple its power.

After a while only the rain peppering the windowsill could be heard. Outside, a truck was turning the corner and splashed through a deep puddle. He studied Grazina’s face and posed, once more, the perennial question: “Hey,” he whispered, willing her milky eyes to stay on him, “who is the president?”

She blinked, her face exhausted yet vacated by a calm, empty look. “I am,” she said. “I’m the president of the United States. And I have made the stuffed cabbages for the secretary of defense. Please send him my best.” She spoke without feeling, her eyes staring blankly past him. Then she pushed herself up and leaned against the wall, her hair matted and strewn down her cheek. He reached over, across the half century between them, and cleared the stray hairs from her damp face.

“And who are *you*, boy?” she asked, pointing at him with her chin. “And what’s that song? Some sort of magic spell?”

Lightning flicked across their upturned, empty hands as they stared at each other.

“Yeah, for raising the dead,” he said.

Grazina’s mouth eased into a weak, tired smile, her missing front tooth the darkest thing he’d seen in months. “Good. Then we can live forever.”

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“**I SAID** ‘what do you *want* to do,’ not ‘what you need to do.’” Grazina was sitting in the claw-foot tub, her mind clear, the evening dose of paroxetine dissolving an hour now in her bloodstream. Though it was only his third time giving her a bath, they had worked out a system. While she undressed, he wiped the rim of the tub down of grime and loose hair, set her medical booster chair at the bottom, then helped her into it. Once the water came just above her chest, he shut off the tap and started soaping her back with the loofah. The fall she suffered years back had fractured her collarbone. Shortly after returning from the hospital, she had tried scrubbing her back and her arm got stuck, pinning her hand to her lower spine. This was before Janet, so Grazina was alone. She had to pull herself out the tub and dial 911 with her one free hand just to have firefighters, young enough to be grandsons, free her arm as she stood naked and shivering in her own living room.

Once Hai finished scrubbing her back, she did the rest while he sat on the floor outside the bathroom reading *Slaughterhouse-Five*.

“What do you want to do in the future, I mean. Looks like you’re some kind of bookworm.” She took a long drag from her cigarette, the smoke blowing out the hallway past his face.

He put the book down and stared at a dusty landscape painting hanging across the hall. “You’ll think it’s stupid.”

“Maybe,” she said. “No promises.” Her amber bracelet clacked against the iron as she flicked ashes in the water.

“I used to want to be a writer. My dream was to write a novel that held everything I loved, including unlovable things. Like a little cabinet.” He shut his eyes—it sounded even more ridiculous aloud. “But that was back in high school. Before I realized it wasn’t real.”

“You wanna be a writer *and* you want to jump off a bridge? That’s pretty much the same thing, no? A writer just takes longer to hit the water.” She tried to laugh but started coughing. “My husband tried to be a poet, you know, and all that gave him was Alzheimer’s.”

Hai peeked around the door. “Really?”

“Eh, he never wrote a single word, that bum. Not that I know of, at least. Too lazy. Just talked about it. About writing his life story, Lithuania, the war, this and that, yada yada. Then one day his brain starts to look like Swiss cheese, like mine now probably.” Shampoo suds ran down her temples as she looked at him, her lips a taut line.

He turned back to the wall. “I just have to read a whole bunch first. Three or four years of reading, then maybe I’ll be ready to write. It’s like a pregnancy.”

“Sounds more like constipation. In my country, most writers got silent pills.”

“Silent pills?”

“Bullets.”

A soft rain started pebbling the window.

“Okay then, Mr. Pushkin. How will you do this?”

“I dunno,” the boy said, tucking his knees to his chest.

“You need money to do anything, you know. My husband’s dead five years now and I still owe for his two-hour funeral. Even dying costs money. Hell, it can cost more than living.”

There was a silence. The night was coming down from the mountains and settling thick around the house.

She was right. He had heard stories, which seemed more like myths, of writers who had to enter a lottery just to live in a shack full of mice somewhere deep in the woods for two or three weeks, scribbling away and avoiding their families. They even call it a fellowship. The emo girl with eye

bags at New Hope had told him about a school up in Vermont where her sister went for a year, a place where promising young artists, mostly from wealthy families, got to “learn by doing.” Where students dressed like the author photos of books they’d yet to write, that some will never write. How come anytime he heard of such unimaginable places, such utopias, he always heard of them too late, the path invisible until he’s long past their junction? But what has *he* done anyway—other than dodge the slow-moving “silent pill” of his life only to fall face down in the ditch he was now in?

“Another thing. We’re down to thirty-four dollars on the EBT,” she sighed. “And it’s only the eighth. I know we’re saving on the delivery charges since you pick ’em up now. But—”

“Okay.” He had a hunch, despite what she had said weeks ago about being good with money, that this was coming.

“For now we’ll just eat the rolls instead of stepping on ’em,” she said.

Hai searched his mind, then remembered his estranged cousin Sony. Last he heard Sony was working at the HomeMarket on the outskirts of East Gladness, just down Route 4. Maybe he’s still there. It would be a long shot, but if Hai apologized, for everything, maybe Sony could get him a job. “I can head to town first thing tomorrow and ask around for work. I’ll help out, for sure. Don’t worry.”

“What’s your skill anyway? You have any skills or what?”

He bit his lip, thinking. “Well, I’m good at looking at things. And, I guess, considering them, like ideas and stuff.”

“Considering!” she said with a wheezing laugh. “That’s a first. I’m afraid being considerate is not a skill. Not in America. Maybe the Vatican, if you’re lucky.”

“It’s called observing. Introspection,” he said, miffed.

“You’re kidding. That’s it?” The cigarette hissed as she chucked it in the water. “Okay, then give me an example.”

“Of what?”

“Of you considering. What do you consider?”

“I dunno.” Even though she couldn’t see him behind the wall, he hid his face between his knees.

The rain was droning steady over the roof shingles. “The rain. Maybe raindrops are like people... Well, that’s not what I mean—” His voice cracked and he suddenly felt unmoored, incredulous. A child.

“Ha! The rain? Every writer who ever lived talked about rain. You know what writing really is?” She paused for effect. “Complaining. About weather. Beautiful complaining. No wonder why Stalin shipped them to Siberia.”

“Please don’t laugh at me,” he mumbled to the floor, surprised at how much this stung.

Grazina grew quiet. A trickle of water. “You know what? Good for you, boy. You’re good at observing. And tomorrow you’ll go to town. You’ll go to town and get a job where you can be the most considerate observer this county has ever known. You hear me?”

He turned around and their eyes met. “Yeah.”

“Good. Now get me out of here. My balls are freezing.”

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HE SKIPPED BREAKFAST the next morning, made a buttered English muffin for Grazina, cutting off the moldy edges, then watched her take her gabapentin and Aricept before heading toward town. He was halfway down the block when she yelled from the door, waving a ziplock bag of baby carrots. “For your heart, for your heart,” she shouted. As he crossed the bridge, carrots in hand, she kept calling from the fire escape, but he couldn’t hear her over the river’s rush—only that she sounded hopeful, which made him hopeful.

It was the end of September now and the steel beams along the bridge gleamed with the season’s first frost. A daylit moon was pinned against a taut blue sky as the morning filtered through aspens coppering along the shores. A whiff of woodsmoke floated up from the trailer park as he approached Route 4, and before long the farmhouses came to view, their fields gone to dirt for autumn. Two eagles were soaring over the shanty houses, their mildewed roofs like the backs of century-old whales. Soon the sidewalk crumbled into the highway shoulder, and the gas stations, fast-food chains, and the one packy marked the outskirts of East Gladness. Before long the HomeMarket

off Cumberland Lane appeared. It sat in the center of the parking lot of a strip mall called Rushing Oaks Business Park, which also had a Family Dollar, a laundromat, a long-defunct CD store, the windows still plastered with decade-old NSYNC tour posters, and a knitting boutique called Knit Pickers, miraculously still in business. On the edge of the strip was another row of trailer homes. Hai had the sudden thought of being a kid in there, going to bed with the glow of the Family Dollar sign falling through your window, which ached in him a strange and inscrutable tenderness.

As far as franchises go, the HomeMarket was a coveted place to work compared to the McDonald's on Harris, the Taco Bell off Silas Deane, the Wendy's or—worst of all—the Dunkin' Donuts on Griswold, owned by a guy infamous for roofying college girls when he was a high school senior in the nineties. Founded in New England, HomeMarket was a fast-casual chain, which meant it was supposed to *seem* fancier, though the pay was still minimum wage. Hai had even heard people bragging about working at HomeMarket. Like Becky Miller, a girl from high school who gave up going to Welles Park, where she'd sit on the bleachers smoking blunts and blasting Mary J. Blige on her boom box with her girlfriends, to scoop mac and cheese and carve up roasted chickens. When someone asked Becky why she stopped coming to the park, she said, “The hell I'm going into that busted-ass park with those busted-ass girls for? I work at HomeMarket now,” and walked away smirking, her new cubic zirconia earrings flashing.

As Hai approached, black smoke issued from the restaurant's chimney, the scent of burnt flesh acrid in the air. The building was small and squat, painted white all over save for the red tiled roof. Positioned behind the logo was a neon-lit pioneer girl in a bonnet with maniacal-eager eyes hoisting a basket of bread from her hip.

Inside, the walls were lined to the ceiling with white tiles. Formica tables, bolted to the floor, stretched across the modest dining area. This clinical interior drew Hai's attention to the far wall, where HomeMarket's poster-sized menu hung, showcasing, in rich, zoomed-in detail, the steaming dishes served in white bowls and laid across reclaimed wood tables, the cloth ruffled just so to exude a rustic, country-house atmosphere, all of it under the sinister

orange lighting common in Thomas Kinkade cottages. Below the image, printed in looping holiday script, was the phrase, *Fill your Home with HomeMarket!* Even as he turned away, heading toward the counter, the poster blazed in the corner of his eye like the residue of a blast.

It was a little after eleven and the store had just opened. A woman in her fifties with dyed red hair tucked into her cap was lifting the metal covers from the heated countertops, revealing smoking vats of vibrant, primary-colored side dishes.

Behind her was a guy loading raw chickens into a seven-row industrial rotisserie oven, the pink meat turning above a row of blistered torsos as fat sizzled mutely behind the glass.

“Deliveries are out back,” the woman said without looking up.

“Oh,” Hai glanced down at his jacket, “I’m not UPS. I’m—”

“Oh okay—what can I get ya, hun?” She flashed a smile that lasted just long enough for her lips to twitch twice before dropping to a pout.

“Does anyone named Sony work here?”

“He’s in the kitchen.” The customer service shtick evaporated and her eyes narrowed. “What for? You not gonna beat him up, are you?”

“No—what? He’s my cousin.”

She examined his hands, as if for weapons. “Hold on.” She turned around and shouted through a cupped palm. “Yo, Sony! Some Chinese guy says he’s your cousin. Get out here and deal with it.”

Squeaky footsteps, then a lanky kid appeared from the back, a head taller than Hai with a long neck and brownish, doe-like eyes. He stood blankly, rubber-gloved hands hovering at his sides.

The woman nodded Sony over. “Don’t just stand there like a dead dick.” She glanced at Hai, chuckling.

With quick, staccato movements, Sony peeled off his rubber gloves and made a beeline to one of the dining tables.

“Hey. Don’t mess with that boy, you hear me?” the oven man called out, loading another rack of chickens and squaring himself at Hai. “His mama’s in jail. So if you got any questions, big or small, you can ask me.”

Hai smiled weakly, gave the man a thumbs-up, and sat down. It had been over two years since he'd last seen Sony, and he didn't know how to begin. He stared at his hands folded in his lap.

Sony was named after the Sony Trinitron, the first TV his father bought once he arrived in America after being released from a reeducation camp back in Vietnam. Though the TV was made in 1968, his old man didn't get one till '91, the year Sony was born. Naming your child after electronic devices was not uncommon among people in refugee camps back then. Hai knew a kid in Windsor named Toshiba (which got him mistaken for Japanese). Aspirational monikers didn't stop at electronics either, but extended to any cultural relic possessing social or monetary value. One of his mother's coworkers named her daughter Simba because she had watched *The Lion King* on repeat while she was pregnant, sobbing each time Mufasa fell off the cliff. Another was named BMW. One kid from the same refugee camp as Hai's family was called MJKarlMalone Truong; rivals in life, Jordan and Malone would be united in the body of an asthmatic Vietnamese boy with a lazy eye who landed, of all places, in North Carolina, home of Jordan's Tar Heels. Their elders named them after whatever they hoped would manifest in life. Why toil away in factories to save for a Lexus when you could make her yourself?

Hai himself was almost named Honda, on account of a red birthmark on his forehead that had an uncanny resemblance to the car dealer's *H* logo. *He's destined for greatness!* his grandmother, the ultimate hype man to her grandchildren, exclaimed in the hospital room in Saigon. *He's born in Vietnam but made in Japan. And by the best car manufacturer known to man!* Though his mother agreed that such a sign could only come from divine messaging, she had a more sober and austere disposition, and settled for Hai, still heeding the letter on his forehead, which faded by the time he could speak.

"It's good to see you, Sony," Hai said. "What are you up to now?"

"I'm sitting in a chair talking to my cousin. But we're not supposed to be talking. Our moms are fighting."

“That’s not how it works. We’re adults. And I meant, *how* are you doing? Like, how are things?”

After Bà ngoại died, Aunt Kim and Sony moved up from Florida. But instead of working with Ma, Aunt Kim decided to rekindle something with an old boyfriend who owned a salon in Coventry, causing the sisters to fall out. Aunt Kim wanted to start fresh with a man who actually *owned* his business, and Ma wanted her sister close now that Bà ngoại was gone. *You can’t just pop up like a ghost after people die*, Ma had told her days after the funeral. *We’re sisters. We got no one else but us*. It sounded simple enough, but when you throw in decades of festering tensions, betrayals, refutations and backstabs, a country still smoldering somewhere in the caverns of memory, the argument became a symbol for everything rotting underneath, both sisters too proud to concede.

“A good soldier can’t turn against his ranks.” Sony straightened. “General McClellan, the first commanding officer of the Army of the Potomac, had untrustworthy lieutenants and ultimately failed in capturing Virginia. Though he wasn’t as incapable as some historians assume. Burnside, on the other hand —”

“Okay, okay.” Hai waved him off. “But we’re not traitors. Or soldiers. We’re related. We’re *blood*.”

“So were the North and the South during what some still call the War of Northern Aggression.”

“Sony. Please. Look, I’m just trying to get a job, okay? You think I can get a job here?” The glow from the giant HomeMarket poster hung over Sony’s head, giving him a lopsided halo.

Sony lowered his eyes and fiddled his fingers, which told Hai he was thinking. Their grandmother always believed Sony was chosen by spirits, that he was tuned into a special channel emitted from beyond the human realm. He remembered Sony rocking side to side in the backyard one summer night when they were little, surrounded by fireflies and humming the theme song to the movie *Gettysburg*. “See that boy?” Bà ngoại said, looking out the window. “The elders are using him. He’s blessed with that third eye, just like my sister, Chi Sáu.”

“What’s he talking about with your mom in jail?” Hai nodded toward the rotisserie man.

“Because she is.” Sony grabbed at a passing fly, then slowly unfurled his fist for Hai to see, revealing nothing. “And his name’s Wayne.”

Sony went on to explain, in a barrage of sentences, his eyes never once looking above Hai’s chest, how Kim and her boyfriend ended up getting caught for arson after they tried to burn down the boyfriend’s nail salon for insurance money when the business was about to go belly-up last winter. “I have her court documents. She can’t read English, so I read everything to her. I was supposed to be her lawyer too, but I don’t have the jurisdiction to practice as an attorney in the state of Connecticut.”

“You also don’t have a law degree.”

Sony ran a finger down the scar in his head, now bright with sweat under the halogens. A nervous tic.

“Hold on, though,” Hai said, looking around. “How did we not know Aunt Kim’s in jail? We would’ve helped you guys. Or something.”

“Cause our moms are *fighting*.”

“What’s the bail?”

“Ten thousand. But if we pay five and half thousand, she gets out. I don’t know how that works.”

“Where are you living now? Your dad’s still in Vermont, right?”

“I’m at the Meyer’s Center.”

“The one off Lilac? That’s a *halfway* house. And you’re barely an adult.”

“I turned eighteen on July twenty-first at 3:46 p.m.” He finally met Hai’s gaze, hurt. “And it’s not a sober-living home anymore. They changed it in 2006. They’re nice to me there. I’m developing life skills. I have no skills and no personality. And I need to develop them. Fast.”

“The hell you talking about?”

“That’s what Dr. Philbern said.”

“Who said you’re crazy?”

“Nobody. You’re saying that.”

“Sony, you doing okay, hun?” called the lady from behind the counter. She raised her cap to peer over at them.

“I gotta get back. We need forty corn breads before the lunch rush and I’m behind.”

“You think I can get a job here? I wanna help with Aunt Kim’s bail.”

“I’m not in charge of team acquisition. You’ll have to talk to BJ. She’s the best manager HomeMarket has ever employed. Well, at least this one. I can’t speak for the others. Only she can judge if you have what it takes. She’s in tomorrow at ten.” Sony got up, wiped invisible crumbs off the table, and pushed in his chair.

“What’s this thing?” Hai picked up an origami bird by the saltshakers, realizing now there was one on each table.

“Those are origami penguins.”

“I know, but...why?”

“I made them for the tables. They’re made just like the traditional swans except I cut off their wings after.”

Hai held the paper bird up. It didn’t look like a penguin, but it did look like a swan with no wings.

“You can have that one. I’ll make another.”

“Here,” Hai said, remembering the carrots, “take these.”

“Baby carrots.” Sony examined the bag in his hand.

“They give you courage.”

“Hmm. I didn’t know that. I’ll have them on my break. They’ll be great dipped in our gravy. But this will be for nutrition *only*. I have enough courage for at least a hundred twenty men.” He walked a few paces and stopped. “Oh, and you should check out *Heroes*.”

“What?”

“You loved *Power Rangers* when we were little. So I recommend the series *Heroes*. No offense,” he held up his hand, “but I prefer reality-based entertainment. Still, you’ll like it. It’s *Power Rangers* but with more science.”

Hai watched him walk away and realized how much he had missed his cousin.

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SONY WAS BORN with hydrocephalus and had to have emergency brain surgery an hour out the womb at Hartford Hospital. It left a long, pencil-width scar that ran down the middle of his head and ended just above the nape of his neck. The kids at school called him “crackhead,” claiming he got it because his mother was a crack addict while pregnant. Sony’s father left him and his mother right after he was born. “My sperm can’t make a retard,” his father said to Aunt Kim while Sony sat peering up at them. “Look at my family line; there is not a *single* retard in the family tree. Not one.” He then packed his bags and vanished to the woods in Vermont, marrying a woman who owned three successful local taquerias and never looking back.

One time, when Hai was nine and Sony was seven, the family was milling about on the floor after dinner when Sony ran into the house, excited after sitting out in the grass all evening. He said, “Mama, Bà ngoại, look! I’m normal now. They gonna let me join the Marines. See?” His Vietnamese wasn’t too good, so he spoke to them mostly in English. He lowered his head and showed them his scar. “I’m not a crackhead anymore. Look!” To their surprise, his scar was black and uniform like the rest of his hair.

“Oh heavens!” Bà ngoại gasped. “It’s a miracle! It finally happened. I knew he was chosen.”

“They didn’t fix nothing,” Aunt Kim snapped in Vietnamese. “Give me that!” She grabbed something from Sony’s fist. She held the black Magic Marker before them all, then before her son, who had sunk to his knees. But then something flickered across Aunt Kim’s face, something both sad and lonesome and pitiful. And she softened, her eyes glassy. Aunt Kim put the marker in her pocket and pulled her boy close, pressing her lips to the smooth, inky skin of his scar. “I know, I know,” she said softly, her lips black with ink. “Now you can join the Marines. But my boy’s too smart to get shot, right? He’s too bright to die, isn’t he?” She stroked his cheek. Ma looked away, her hand over her mouth, as Bà ngoại reached out and squeezed Sony’s tiny foot. Sony, normal at last, smiled into his mother’s chest.

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HAI WAS LEAVING the HomeMarket parking lot when something caught his eye. There, at the far end of the strip mall, in the last storefront, just before the tan brick wall dropped into a dirt lot full of broken glass and a tipped-over dumpster, was a vinyl banner in red letters: GRAND OPENING!!!! SGT. PEPPER'S PIZZA: A FAMILY PLACE.

He was surprised to feel a surge of warmth toward those exclamation marks, as if typed into Microsoft Paint in a jolt of ecstatic aspiration and quickly printed out and hoisted over the entrance. Outside, a middle-aged man in an orange Sikh turban was wiping down the front windows while a young woman—his daughter?—was inside loading soda cans into an industrial fridge. Taped to the door, above the hours, was a *Yes We Can!* Obama '08 poster. Looking closer, Hai remembered that this spot had once belonged to a debt collection office. Maybe pizza replacing loan sharks meant East Gladness was finally turning a new leaf. He had the urge to shout, *Thank you for believing in our shitty town! I will eat your pizza forever!* but he was already down the road and the words never came.

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“IT’S AN INTERVIEW,” he said, filling Grazina in over dinner, “so there’s no promises. But it’s the fanciest restaurant in town. And I found out my cousin’s still there.”

“Good. So tomorrow you find out for sure.” She put down her fork and dabbed her mouth with a napkin, the plastic tray of Salisbury steak empty save for the liquefied brownie. A hand radio, turned low to the news, crackled on the counter behind her.

“You’ll get it. I can tell.”

“How so?” He lit a cigarette and leaned back.

“I woke from my nap and just had a feeling, that’s all. It popped in my head. And I thought, *He’s gonna get it.*”

And now rumors from the White House, the man on the radio said, claim that the president is hoping to broker another round of troop withdrawals—this