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May It Come Easy

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by

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ABSTRACT

May It Come Easy is a collection of stories and a novel excerpt.

CONTENTS

I. May It Come Easy

We seemed to assimilate each other, the characters and I, and when I raised my head I had to tell myself where I was.

Don DeLillo

A. In a New Country

The man who ran the store on the first floor of my apartment building called me Cumartesi—Turkish for Saturday—after the name of the cheapest bottle of wine he sold. I entered his shop and went straight for it, brought it upstairs and drank from the bottle. I had no glasses, no plates or silverware. I took long walks in the evenings and spent nights in my apartment eating lahmacun, the closest thing I could find to pizza. As the light bulbs went out, first in the bathroom, then in the kitchen, I failed to replace them. I wasn't sure where I could buy them.

I taught a compulsory English class for undergraduates at a university on the European side of Istanbul. From the beginning it was clear my students were bored. They scrolled through their text messages and talked openly with each other in the long rows of the enormous auditorium. I tried everything to win their admiration, or at the very least, their attention. I played American pop music. I tried having them write poems in the style of Mevlana. I cancelled lectures to show movies and have them write reviews. Nothing worked. I was teaching students not much younger than I was, who, if they didn't resent me outright, seemed to think of me as a curiosity from an irrelevant world.

Clusters of students ceased attending. Each lecture I'd stare out anxiously at the expanding patches of empty seats in the auditorium. The university cut my course load in half. I looked everywhere for ways to make up the lost income, desperate to avoid asking my father for any more help. I could almost feel him hoping for it, all the way across Europe and the Atlantic, although on my better days I was able to convince myself this sprang from his compassion. He was president of the small, Midwestern college from which I had just graduated—a place he had determined I shouldn't stray too far from—and had a way of brushing aside, often in five words or less, my most carefully constructed plans. “Good luck,” he told me, when I shared my

intention to move abroad and teach, like him, in a college lecture hall. To save money, I stopped going out with the few friends I had from the faculty and cut down to one meal a day. Eventually I found work, teaching high school students at a community center on my street.

That's where I met Ersan.

Unlike my students at the university, who seemed to vanish into the vastness of the city as soon as they stepped off campus, I saw my students from the community center everywhere. In the restaurant where I ordered my dinner of lahmacun; in the cramped, leafy park at the end of my street where I called my father every other Saturday to let him know how flawlessly my life was unfolding; in the store below my apartment where I bought my nightly bottle of Cumartesi (although when they were present I'd pause at its entrance and fiddle with my phone, wait for them to leave before I entered, so that they wouldn't overhear the owner's greeting). They were ubiquitous. At first, every interaction filled me with dread. I was sure each of them held an ability to see through me, to the smoldering core of what I was, or at least what I felt I was—a false teacher, a wino with a lightless apartment—but slowly I grew to enjoy their presence. One of them, at the very least, would know where I could buy light bulbs, if I ever worked up the courage to ask. Seeing familiar faces helped me feel as though I were making a home for myself, becoming a fixture in the neighborhood. They were always polite, always greeted me with a shy smile and an overly enthusiastic wave, as though any subtler gesture would be lost in translation. They always broke into laughter just after I passed.

Ersan was one of my new students. I ran into him during one of my walks. He was sitting outside a coffee house with several students from the community center.

"It's Edward," I heard one of them say.

On a whim, I approached. I couldn't decide whether to greet them in English or Turkish, and a kind of jumbled, unintelligible mix came out. Only Ersan responded. He asked me, in English, if I lived around there.

“Close,” I said.

“How close?” he asked.

“Not too close,” I said.

He smiled, as if he had caught me in a lie. He asked if I wanted a cigarette.

“You smoke?” I asked.

“Here,” he said. “Away from our parents.” Some of his friends laughed. Some of them looked at him sternly. I think they were worried I would get them in trouble. Ersan sat erect and skinny, with a look that suggested he either did not register their glances or did not care what was behind them.

I shrugged. “Okay,” I said. I didn't normally smoke, but I didn't want to seem impolite, or prim, and I didn't want to leave just yet. He offered the pack and I took a cigarette. He struck a match and I bent toward the flame.

We smoked in nervous silence. There were no extra chairs, so I stood. I found myself afraid that someone I knew might see me smoking with these seventeen-year-olds. Another teacher, or maybe someone who lived in my building. It was a foolish thought. No one knew me well enough to care about what I did or who I did it with. I sucked in the smoke, imagined it scorching my throat. The pain seemed to corroborate the rebelliousness of the act. I felt like I was back in high school, doing what I had always been afraid to, with the kind of kids my father insisted I avoid.

I smoked my cigarette down to the nub, smiled, and nodded goodbye. I mentioned something about class the following Saturday. I turned to leave.

“Are you going home?” Ersan asked.

I had no idea. “Yes,” I said.

“I'll walk with you.”

And just like that, he was by my side.

It began with the walking. A pressure I had felt before, that I hadn't expected to find in Turkey, that in some vague way involved Ersan. A pressure I associated with my father, and the understanding that everything I did was wrong, that everything I lived must be lived in secret. I had grown up in a perpetual state of fault, and now here, as far away as I could think to go, the sensation had followed me, and for the first time I recognized its borderlessness.

Ersan wore dark jeans and a white dress shirt, still brilliant despite the heavy, humid air. He seemed to float above the city's grime. He lit a cigarette with a match and flicked it into a puddle. He had all the gestures down, the practiced glances and shrugs, knew when to light his cigarette and where to toss the match.

We reached my street, my apartment building. I searched for my keys, turned to say goodbye.

“I want to see your flat,” he said. There was a constant gleam of appraisal in his eyes, as though he were always assessing people and things, determining their value. A part of me wanted to know where I stood.

When he saw me hesitating, he laughed.

“Come,” he said. “It will be fun.”

We walked up the three flights to my floor and I unlocked the door. He followed me inside, wandered through the few rooms while I walked into the bedroom to hang my coat and try to understand what it was I was doing.

"I love it," I heard him say.

I laughed. He seemed earnest. I came back and asked him if he wanted something to drink.

He smiled. "Okay," he said.

We sat on my living room floor and passed my bottle of Cumartesi back and forth until it was empty. I ran downstairs and got another. When I came back, he was sitting with his legs sprawled across the living room carpet. He saw me enter and smiled, pulled them in slowly, shifting so that his back was against the couch. I sat beside him.

"Forgive me," he said. "I drink," he paused, as though unsure of what came next. "Ara sıra."

"Occasionally," I said, proud to recognize the word from my meager accumulation of Turkish.

He smiled as I opened the bottle, silently mouthing the word as I passed it to him.

"An American who speaks Turkish," he said, and took a long drink.

I felt a tightening in my chest, struggled for something to say. It was as though my body was shutting down, preparing for some awful event, an imminent, unavoidable pain just beyond my field of vision.

"And you are from New York?" Ersan asked.

I laughed, shook my head. "I told you in class," I said, realizing how harsh I sounded, how impatient.

He looked at me, smiled in a way that made me feel foolish.

“The Midwest,” I said. “A small town. Conservative, religious.” I paused. “Çok küçük şehir,” I added, gesturing as though I could hold my hometown and all its inhabitants in the space between my thumb and forefinger.

Recognition spread across Ersan's face. He nodded. “The east is like that,” he said, waving his hand lazily, ambiguously. “Everything is küçük.”

“Is that where you're from?” I asked.

He nodded.

I asked where. He shrugged.

“You will not know it,” he said, raising his eyebrows, challenging me. It was in that indifference for his hometown that I understood the beginnings of what would draw us together.

“What brought you to Istanbul?”

“My father,” he said. “He is a police captain.”

“Do you like it?”

Ersan smiled. “Of course. It's Istanbul.”

“Does your father?”

He shrugged.

“Here,” he said, and paused. He gestured with his hands as he struggled to explain. “Here he is small. In Istanbul.” He pointed with both index fingers at the floor. “In the east he is big.” He looked at me, laughed at the ridiculousness of his gestures. His teeth were stained from the wine. “He needs to be big.”

I nodded and smiled. “My father is like that too,” I said, startled by my candor. I was drunk. I wondered if Ersan could sense it.

“Yes,” he said, to what I wasn't sure. He placed his hand on my arm. “And what about you?”

“I want to be small,” I said. “As small as possible.”

“Istanbul is a good place for that,” he said. “You can be anything.” He paused. “Of course my father does not say this,” he said. “To him this is not true. To him, you need to be what you should be.”

I smiled. We had covered auxiliary verbs that morning. “You got it,” I said.

“What?” he asked.

“The Auxiliary verb,” I said. “For obligation.” I was thinking about my father, how everything Ersan hadn't said I'd understood. The pressure inside me had tightened, had shrunk to a dense drop. I felt as though its mass would pull me through my floor and the apartments below, through the earth, all the way to its core.

I reached for Ersan in the half-darkness.

“I have sisters,” he said, smiling.

I moved closer.

“Perhaps you would like to meet them?”

“Perhaps,” I said, pressing against him, harder now, certain he could feel the tremor in my touch, the hidden pressure of my heart.

His body felt so cold, so unlike mine. “They are all married though,” he said. He laughed. “A shame. They would be wild for you. An American. Blonde hair. Blue eyes.” He hummed a tune I didn't recognize. It took me a moment to realize he was nervous, too.

“You're cold,” I said, taking his hands.

“I am,” he said.

When he asked me if I thought he was beautiful, I said yes. He told me to touch my favorite part of him. I grabbed his hair, pulled it first as though testing it, pulled harder. I think I made a joke about its color. “Wine-dark hair,” I think I said, and laughed, pleased with myself. He laughed too, pulled me against him.

That night I offered to walk him home, but he insisted I didn't. It would be better at this hour if he were alone, he said. His father might suspect something. I watched from my window as he walked down the street, pausing to light a cigarette at the end of the block before he disappearing around a corner.

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Over the next few months my classes at the university blurred. The only thing I know for certain is that I continued teaching at the community center and sleeping with Ersan. I would find him during my walks. Always the same route. I would head down Bahçe Caddesi in the direction of Ortaköy, cut left toward the coffee house on the narrow street behind the winding boulevard that led to Taksim Square. Most days he was there, usually with friends, students from the community center. He would rise and we would start our trip home, and I would pick up a bottle of Cumartesi at the shop below my apartment, letting him in before I did so.

We would lay stretched out on my living room rug. I had a bed, but I hadn't bought sheets for it. I slept on top of the mattress in my sleeping bag. He didn't know this. We never entered my bedroom. I think he thought it was an amusing American affectation to use different parts of the house for sex. That it added a thrilling nonchalance. In a way this bounded what we were doing, kept it from spilling beyond the borders we’d established.

Then one night, the last snowfall of winter, he told me he loved me.

We were lying on my floor, a half-finished bottle of wine between us. I didn't know how to respond, so I laughed. A part of me hated myself. I had my reasons for living like a penitent. Kitchenless, sheetless, stumbling around in the dark. It had taken a decade for me to find the courage to let a man seduce me, and even then it had been a boy. Now that it had happened I didn't know what to do, who I could tell.

He sat up on his elbows and looked at me. The streetlamp's glow came through the loose slats of the drawn blinds, painting his face in horizontal stripes. When it was clear he wasn't going to explain himself away as drunk or young or tired, I spoke.

"You're seventeen," I said.

He asked me what I meant.

I looked over his body. "It means you can't love anything besides yourself."

My father had told me this over dinner the night before I'd started college, in the dining room of the president's mansion, and I'd wondered as I sat across from him just how true it was. He had taken to giving such pronouncements in the wake of my mother's death, as though to make up for her absence, or prepare me for the world that had snatched her so suddenly. The only thing I knew to do with his bleak advice was to bury it, then pass it on in equally harsh terms when the opportunity arose. As I spoke the words to Ersan, I wondered if I meant them. It was hard to distinguish, when I was seventeen, whether I was full of energy and fear or simply selfish, and only five years later, it was nearly impossible to tell if I had changed at all. But it hurt to say them to him, to believe they might be true. That he might not love me, might not even know he was mistaken.

Ersan rolled away and stood, his body strips of shadow and light. He left the room. I heard the bathroom door open and close. A panic surged in me, and I found myself cycling

through ways I could end what was happening. When he came back, I decided I would tell him enough was enough. That this had gone too far. He was my student, and young, and if this had happened in America and people found out, I would be in serious trouble. Turkey most likely had a similar law, one that I didn't want to end up on the wrong side of.

When Ersan returned and I said all of this, he laughed.

"You are already on the wrong side of Turkey," he said, reaching down. He squeezed me, pulled his hand away roughly and placed it flat on my stomach, ran his sharp nails against my skin.

At some point, a point we reached every evening we spent together in that tiny apartment, the silence became unbearable, and Ersan rose, picked through our pile of mingled clothes for his undershirt and briefs, dressed and left. That night I followed him. I knew to wait until he had descended the three flights of stairs and was crossing the lobby. The footfalls would echo a certain way, and I could make my move. I clung to the walls of the stairwell to avoid triggering as many of the automatic overhead lights as possible. When I hit the street, I saw his figure at the end of the block. He was smoking, walking slowly. He seemed to be gesturing to himself. Once or twice he looked back. Each time I thought he recognized me. But he didn't, or at least gave no sign to suggest he had. At first I wasn't sure what I was doing, how long I would trail him. I wanted to catch him in a lie, have our relationship exposed as a falsehood, an illusion that couldn't possibly exist in the world I lived in, among the people I knew.

I knew Beyoğlu well enough at that point to know its main routes. Ersan cut through it senselessly. He would turn up streets that curved back toward my apartment, down slanted alleys and crumbling staircases toward the bottom of the neighborhood, as though heading for the Bosporus, before suddenly stopping and heading back uphill. Every so often he would stop, pull

out his cigarettes, light one, and flick the match into the street. Sometimes he would toss the cigarette in the gutter after a few drags, sometimes he would smoke it down to the filter. I followed him past midye dolma vendors, their folding tables piled high with stuffed mussels and lemon wedges, past gaggles of drunk students stumbling home, followed him until the streets emptied, until it was almost dawn and the morning's first call to prayer was imminent. I trailed him down an alley that opened into a boulevard and left him there, wandering, smoking, looking up at the darkened apartments that lined the long and twisting block.

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I kept up my lessons at the university, as hopelessly as ever. The community center switched me to adult classes to fill in for a pregnant colleague, and I went from teaching Ersan and his classmates to accountants and cab drivers. Instead of diagramming sentences we would go out for tea and talk aimlessly in broken Turkish and sometimes English about relations between Turkey and Israel, or things about the United States I missed. They never believed my answers. I walked slowly through the halls of the community center, delaying, hoping to catch Ersan on his way to whatever class he might be attending, but I never saw him. No matter where I went on my walks I couldn't find him. When I went out with my adult students, I'd sit straight in my chair, crane my neck to watch the distant space past the many heads surrounding me in the cafe, hoping to catch a glimpse of any students walking past. Every cluster seemed to contain him, every figure pausing to light a cigarette in just his way.

My adult students believed I was a spy. They were never shy about bringing this up. Who did I report to, they'd ask. What was I looking for? Sometimes they seemed serious, sometimes they teased me. I had a difficult time addressing the charge, explaining that, contrary to their allegations, I'd never been less fraudulent in my life. That, despite how dejected I felt, how

miserable I was over the sudden and prolonged absence of a former student, I had never been more myself. “My life is not that interesting,” I'd always answer, attempting to smile. And it wasn't. Not when Ersan wasn't around.

I found myself explaining these interactions to my father over the phone during our conversations every other Saturday. It was spring, each day warmer than the last, and it was nice enough to sit in the park again and call him. I struggled to explain the absurdities that seemed so familiar, so lived-in. My father would laugh politely, and if pressed admit he didn't fully understand, before asking me when I was going to return. The college was planning the fall curriculum and there was a history class he wanted me to help teach. I was largely silent. I didn't know how to explain, to him, the circumstances that had moved me toward developing my own wants and understandings, things that had long eluded me. Listening to him I found it hard not to think of my time in Istanbul as a life outside of reality. If he sensed that something had ripped a fissure in me, he hid it well. He seemed to know, however, that something was wrong and wasn’t hesitant to offer his misgivings. Through the tinny echo of my cell phone he was breathless and quick.

“Look,” he said, one Saturday afternoon. “I've spoken to the university's rector.” He knew the rector, had arranged the position, in fact. It was one of the few foreign universities with which his college had an established exchange program.

I swallowed. “And?”

“He informed me that half of your classes have been cancelled.” He paused, letting the weight of the implication settle squarely on my shoulders. “How are you managing?”

“I'm finding a way,” I said, kicking at some pigeons squabbling near my feet. “There's a community center I do some teaching in.”

“That wasn't part of your plan.”

“Not initially.”

I think he must have thought I sounded hurt. “Learning to adjust is a valuable skill,” he said. I could tell he wanted to say something more. I waited for him to break the silence. Finally he did. “Although of course the need to adjust betrays a lack of preparation.”

“I know,” I said, hoping to sound assured.

He sighed. “Edward?”

“Yes?”

“When are you going to get started on your life?”

Something in me understood that this moment was my chance to broach what had happened there, in Istanbul. I was moving on, or at the very least, never returning. I'm staying, I wanted to say. But I deferred. I hadn't seen Ersan in weeks. It almost felt as though he’d never existed.

“I don't know,” I said. “Soon.”

“I hope so,” my father said. “Delta is having a spring sale. I've got some miles you could use.”

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Then one night, a month before final exams, Ersan showed up at my apartment. He was carrying a bottle of Cumartesi and a wrapped bundle of lahmacun. His cheeks and neck were tinged with a growth of beard I had never seen before that lent his boyish face a touch of maturity. He was sweating, as though he’d hurried over. He crossed the threshold into the living room like something treacherous lay hidden in the shag of the rug. I watched him move to the window,

look out, set the food down on the couch and turn toward me. He presented the bottle awkwardly. A peace offering, but for what?

I didn't know what to say. “It's you,” or “where have you been,” or “I thought I'd never see you again” each seemed histrionic.

“Here I am,” Ersan said. His voice seemed unusually thick.

I nodded. Ersan uncorked the wine and passed it to me.

I took a drink from the bottle, returned it. “There is a problem,” Ersan said. There was concern in his eyes, something I had never seen before, that I wanted to believe was caused, in one way or another, by me, or a lack of me.

I stood, unsure of what to do with my arms, which seemed suddenly vestigial. I crossed them. What could it possibly be? I wanted to ask. I haven't seen you in months. A part of me felt as though I should be angry with him for forcing me to put off so many things: plans to stay, plans to return, plans to go someplace else. A part of me sensed he was upset, felt as though it was my duty to provide some sort of solace, something I had only ever attempted with one or two strange, fragile girls in college.

“What is it?”

“My father suspects something.”

I was struck with the same frustration I felt when warding off the allegations of my adult students. What was there to be wary of? What had Ersan been doing that would raise any kind of suspicion?

I asked Ersan what he meant.

“Us,” he said. “You and me.” He had the bottle in his hand and he pointed it at himself and at me as he spoke. He was drunk. I told him so and he laughed, a spiteful laugh he seemed

too young to own. I wanted to tell him that laugh didn't belong to him. That the beard and the sweat didn't either. He seemed grounded, suddenly, in the morass of the city. He spoke, and I stood helplessly, clenching and unclenching my empty, worried hands, desperate for something to hold.

His father's subordinates patrolled our neighborhood regularly and had seen Ersan and me on our walks. They'd watched him come up to my apartment several times, leave hours later, in the early morning. They'd reported back to his father, who'd put a tail on him. He was sure of it. He'd been avoiding me to keep from revealing our relationship, which he hastened to point out wasn't criminal in Turkey. Still, his father wouldn't tolerate it. He thought he could delay, wait until his father had forgotten. He explained how for weeks he had walked right by my apartment, right below my window, when he wasn't sure he had shaken whoever was trailing him. That tonight was the first night he was sure he had succeeded, and to celebrate he had brought dinner.

“Things are different here,” he said. “It's not like it is back home for you.”

I laughed loudly, once, pleased with how vindictive it sounded. I'd been waiting all this time to sound like this, to shield my cowardice and confusion with someone else's assumption, any assumption, about what I'd hidden for so long.

He looked confused, and hurt, and I immediately regretted my reaction.

“I'm sorry,” I said. I didn't know what to do. I moved toward the window, drew the blinds back with a finger. Ersan forced a smile.

“What does this mean?” I asked.

“He put in for transfer,” Ersan said. “We're going back east.”

I felt some sharp humiliation shift in me. I looked down at my chest, as though I could locate its source, see it through my shirt, through my skin. I wondered if Ersan sensed it. When I

looked up and into his face, I saw he had. “Why don't you just leave him?” I asked, knowing the impossibility of the proposition. “Let him go. Stay with me.”

Ersan shook his head slowly, sadly, as though amused that someone so much older than him—an American—could be so naive. “I can't,” he said. “He's my father.” He laughed and shrugged, took his cigarettes from his pocket and put one to his lips. I hated him until I saw his thin hands trembling as he held up a match.

You can learn to father yourself, I wanted to say, unsure if it were true. Certain, in fact, that it wasn't. My own father loomed then, in my mind. We unwrapped the lahmacun and ate, in silence, on the floor. When we were finished, I spoke.

“I will never see my father again.”

“Oh?” he asked, lighting another cigarette. “Will you stay in Istanbul?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Or maybe south or west. Maybe Europe. The Aegean.” I spoke directions, continents, coasts as they came to me. My mind was working furiously, drafting plans, casting them aside, drafting more.

“Maybe I'll open a hostel,” I said. I took his cigarette from his lips, took a long draw.

“You don't smoke,” he said.

“Come with me,” I said, exhaling. “You can bring Turks in. I'll attract westerners.”

He laughed. “It sounds like a brothel.”

“Sure,” I said, coughing. I tried to smile. I felt young, younger than I'd felt the day we'd met, months before, outside the coffee house. Younger than the day my first light bulb went out and I'd stared at it, aware for the first time that I had never replaced one in my entire life, that I didn't have a clue where to find one in that large and gaping city, that I didn't know anything. I

passed him his cigarette. “What happens when you leave?” I asked. He was suddenly a stranger, a lingering party guest, someone to swap half-hearted plans with as you collected coats.

“I'll go east,” he said. “You can come find me.” His words floated in the negative space between joke and plea.

He dropped the nub of his cigarette in the now empty bottle of wine, and we kissed. He left almost immediately afterward, forgetting his cigarettes on the floor. From my window, I watched him pat each of his pockets for the pack, watched him hesitate for a moment, as though considering whether to return, before continuing up the sidewalk. I watched him shrink and then disappear around the corner as I smoked them down, one by one, until none were left.

I spent the final month of the semester in my apartment, hoping Ersan would return, wanting to be there when he did. My father’s voicemails accumulated. It wasn't until the evening after I taught my last classes that I left for anything but work. I hit the street and curved south, downhill, my path starting the way it always had, before it inexplicably changed, and I realized I was following the same twists and circles I'd crossed the night I'd followed Ersan. I walked down alleys, up staircases that carved harsh gashes in the city's steep hills. I caught glimpses of the Bosporus, its oily water soaked with twilight, cargo ships framed between crooked apartment blocks. I passed couples on benches, cats and humans digging through dumpsters, simit sellers headed home. It took me a while to understand what I was searching for, to realize the hopelessness of the task. Still, I pressed on. Up Bahçe Caddesi. Past the community center, the coffee house. Until, long after the last call to prayer, I came upon the spot I had left Ersan, months earlier, without a clue where I'd come from, or where I'd end up.

Above me the vacant night stretched across Istanbul like blackout curtains, like something pulled over the city to shield it from some menacing force just beyond the emptiness.

The block's buildings were all dark, except for a window two stories above where I stood. I knew that beyond a sliver of a chance, there was no way it was Ersan's apartment. I also knew that everything he'd told me could have been a lie, a story you tell a terrified foreigner in a new country, ready to believe anything. I stood beneath that lit window a long time, on the steep sidewalk at the entrance of the building. I stayed there until the morning's first call to prayer swept the empty streets, until the sky began to lighten. No shadow crossed its light. No one was waiting for me.

B. May It Come Easy

Then one morning, four months after James first slept with her, Damla was at his apartment. He knew immediately something was wrong. She only visited for scheduled lessons.

"I am missing," she said, when he opened the door. She stood in her full-length raincoat and headscarf, studied his face for a reaction. She didn't seem afraid of anyone overhearing her—no one spoke English in Ağrı.

It took James a moment to understand. She had meant to say "late." He thought about the panicked aftermath of that first time, about hurriedly destroying the evidence that they'd slept together, that he'd been her first, burning the bloody bed sheets in the dumpster behind his building as soon as she'd left, terrified her uncle might discover them during one of his impromptu visits. Mohammed was the vice rector of the university James worked for and looked after James as though he was family. He loved tidying up the apartment whenever he stopped by, letting himself in when James wasn't home. He had his own key to the place, which the university owned.

"For how long?" James asked.

Damla looked at her shoes. "Eight days."

He motioned her into the living room, where they sat on the stiff couch. "It's early still," he said, worried she could sense his fear.

"This is new," she said, with the same seriousness she demonstrated when discussing grammar.

"I could buy a test," he said, thinking about the pharmacy in the center of town.

She sighed, and he understood. The American in Ağrı buying a pregnancy test. The rumors that would spread.

“Did you tell your uncle?”

She shook her head.

He exhaled. That was good. She hadn't told Mohammed. He ran his fingers under her headscarf, pushed it off of her, undid her tight bun so that her hair, dark and smooth, flowed onto her shoulders and over her back. She took his hands, pulled them away from her hair and onto her lap. It was hard for James to tell how she felt, his hands in hers, her nails a light and airy blue. The color stuck out against her drab outfit.

“I’ll think of something,” James said, standing. *“*Expect a plan*.”*

Damla smiled slighty, nodded once with that same studied seriousness. “Okay,” she said. “Thanks.” She rocked forward slightly, and stood. James guided her toward the door, where she adjusted her hair and retied her headscarf. A deep relief rose in him. She hadn't cried, he hadn't needed to console her. When she finished, he took both of her hands, looked down at her nails. “Pretty,” he said.

She smiled.

He walked her down the stairs to the entryway, just like he did after each lesson. It was important to keep up appearances. He felt odd, as though he was watching the moment play itself out from far away. “There are many things we can do,” he said, opening the door onto the street. “Let's talk when we meet for your next lesson.”

Damla nodded. She seemed just as eager as James to end the conversation.

He stood watching her walk until she disappeared down the street, then went back upstairs, into his apartment, and bought a plane ticket home.

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The following morning James was at Mohammed's apartment building, huddled under its overhang, trying to avoid the rain, trying not to focus on the fact that Mohammed was Damla's uncle. James had found the teaching position on one of the blogs he checked whenever he felt particularly burdened by the immensity of Istanbul. He'd imagined a spare existence in a town whose name translated to Pain, teaching English in the mornings, exploring the foothills of Mount Ararat in the afternoons. He met Mohammed at the Ağrı bus station, his legs stiff from the twenty-three hour journey across Turkey. Mohammed looked as though he'd come straight from the lecture hall—hunched shoulders cloaked in a worn blazer, reading glasses slipping down his nose. Later, over several rounds of tea, he quizzed James on his hometown and life in the States. Then, after discussing the agricultural terminology seminars James would lead, Mohammed mentioned his niece, the secretary of the university's rector—a man from Gaziantep just appointed to head the new university. Mohammed explained, proudly, that she was the one who'd floated posting the job on an Istanbul blog popular with expats. As a result, her new boss had rewarded her progressive suggestion with a slight raise in salary and the responsibility of recruiting native English speakers, which she had to balance with her graduate research in irrigation development. Mohammed then asked James to tutor her. "She is sharp," he'd said, flashing his quick smile. "You will enjoy it."

James pressed Mohammed's buzzer.

"Kim O?" Mohammed asked through the intercom.

"James."

"Tamam," Mohammed said. "I am coming."

James tried to read his tone. He needed Mohammed's help today. Without it, he wouldn't be able to get his exit stamp, wouldn't be able to leave Ağrı, wouldn't make his flight in Istanbul.

A group of children approached, coated in mud from the waist down, one of them dribbling a soccer ball. He felt exposed to the people and the rain and wanted to get inside, to get this finished. He was leaving, and Damla was staying, and Mohammed would find out soon enough about their classes.

He could still hear the silence in which she undressed, feel the stillness pressing on his eardrums. He tried not to consider what would happen to Damla. He'd read about Turkey's abortion laws after he bought his ticket. They seemed different from ones in other heavily Islamic countries. More progressive. Women could get one on their own, without male consent, up to ten weeks after conception. Twenty, if the woman's health was endangered, or if she'd been raped. Could she claim that? James wondered. It would buy her extra time. He'd leave her a note suggesting she do that, he decided. He'd include the law's time frames, the exceptions to those time frames. She was a resourceful student. She could decide how to approach it. Whatever she chose, he'd be gone. He decided she'd be okay, tried to force her from his mind. Mohammed appeared in the doorway.

"My friend."

"Mohammed." James smiled, tried not to focus on the fact that it was Mohammed helping him escape.

"Do you have your passport?"

James nodded.

"Residency permit?"

He pulled it from his pocket and displayed it.

"Very sudden," Mohammed said.

James nodded, trying to remember word for word what he'd said about his mother in Mohammed's office the previous afternoon. Had he said *prog*nosis, or *diag*nosis? Did it matter? He looked down at the ground.

Mohammed stepped back, stared at James intently. "Family is important," he said. It was the kind of obvious statement only someone speaking in a second language could make. "Does Damla know you are leaving?" he asked.

James looked away. "Yes," he lied.

"A shame," Mohammed said. "She likes you."

Something rose in James' throat, hot and acidic, and for a moment he thought he would be sick, right there, in front of Mohammed, but he coughed into his hand, forced it back down.

Mohammed squeezed James' shoulder. "You'll be home soon, inşallah."

James nodded, wiping a trickle of saliva from his mouth.

They started toward the center of town, toward the administration building where James would request his exit stamp.

***

They circled the building to a side entrance, paused in the entryway to stomp away mud on the cardboard panels laid out as carpeting before passing through a metal detector. Mohammed turned to one of the guards and spoke. The guard pointed at one of the innumerable doors that lined the walls of the first floor of the lobby.

"Come," Mohammed said.

James followed Mohammed's squeaking steps across the slick tile.

The room they entered was full of old men in threadbare suits. The wooden benches that lined the wall were all full. A secretary hustled around the room from one man to the next, rattling off Turkish.

Mohammed made for the secretary, whose back was turned to the doorway. She was talking to a man sitting in a chair in a corner. She stood straight up and Mohammed cut in front of two waiting men and spoke into her ear. She turned and looked at him. He nodded and smiled.

James jammed his hands into his pockets, hung back by the doorway. He didn't want to move into the room, where something might be required of him. He never knew what to do in these situations, knew next to nothing of Turkish or Kurdish. Ağrı was different than Istanbul—the parents of the children he'd tutored there all spoke some English. At the time, he'd been excited to leave that behind. It was part of the allure of moving to eastern Turkey.

The secretary looked at Mohammed and gestured toward the only other door in the office. "Şimdi yok," James heard her say, which meant "not now." Mohammed cocked his head and rolled his eyes impatiently. Everyone seemed to be listening.

"She is saying he is not here," Mohammed said to James.

"Who isn't here?"

"The civil clerk," Mohammed said. "He is in a meeting. She says these men are all waiting."

"What should we do?"

"This is nothing," Mohammed said, moving toward the door to the lobby. "Come."

James followed him out.

From the lobby Mohammed turned quickly into another room, packed with a line of people winding away from a narrow counter. Exposed light bulbs dangled from twisting wires. A

charged grumble coursed through the room. People stood bunched in small, tight groups. Occasionally the line would shuffle forward, but no one seemed happy with the illusory progress. Up front a man and the lone clerk were immersed in what looked like a heated exchange, shooting words back and forth, gesticulating wildly. James wondered how long it would take for Damla to make a decision once she knew. He wondered if she would have to navigate the same kind of bureaucracy. He hoped she was wrong but he doubted it. He tried to imagine whether he'd know if something was growing inside him. It seemed like one of those things you'd implicitly understand.

Mohammed worked his way through the crowd. A few men gestured with exaggerated motions toward the back of the line, which was somewhere near James. As he neared the front, Mohammed shouted something at the clerk behind the desk who waved the back of his hand in Mohammed's direction. Mohammed fought his way forward until he was in front of the clerk, impossible to ignore.

Back by the door James shifted uncomfortably. He held his hands in front of him. In the harsh light they looked ashen. He watched the room. The appearance of order dissipated. Really, there was no line. The scene before him was not unlike how he imagined the floor of a stock exchange just before the closing bell, everyone engrossed in their own shouts and gestures. He tried to imagine a Turkish hospital, wondered if it was just as chaotic, or if it was neat and quiet. He pictured a waiting room full of women in headscarves, seated in hard plastic chairs, staring silently at the floor.

Mohammed reappeared and grabbed James' elbow, swimming through people with his other arm, pulling James toward the door. "We must go to the governor," he said.

"Of Ağrı?"

Mohammed nodded.

They reached the lobby and Mohammed strode up its staircase two steps at a time. James tried to keep up.

***

James and Mohammed sat across from the governor in mismatched chairs. By now James had no idea what was happening. The quick visits in each room confused him. The building disoriented him. Its halls and rooms were indistinguishable, bathed in light that bleached the walls the pallid shade of minced onions, the doors a dull green.

The governor pressed a button on an intercom and spoke. A moment later a short man burst in with a tray holding three saucers and three tulip-shaped glasses of dark, steaming tea. He placed them on the desk. The governor picked up a dish of individually wrapped sugar cubes and offered it, first to James, then to Mohammed. They each took two.

"So you're leaving Turkey," the governor said in Turkish, as each stirred his tea.

"Yes, I am going," James said. He paused. "Unfortunately," he added, trying to sound disappointed, surprised to find that a part of him was.

The governor smiled. He turned to Mohammed and spoke, and Mohammed launched into his rapid Turkish, loud and direct. James tried to follow, tried to recognize individual words, to listen for phrases he knew.

Mohammed elbowed James, startling him. "He wants to see your residency permit," he said.

James handed it across the desk. The governor took it, flipped through its pages, returned it. James looked at Mohammed. "So," James said.

Mohammed looked at the governor, at James. He sighed. “He cannot do anything,” Mohammed said. “He wants to, but he cannot.”

“What do you mean?” James asked, trying to suppress his frustration. “He’s the governor.”

“Assistant governor.”

“The assistant governor?”

“*An* assistant governor.”

“How many are there?”

“Of what?”

“Assistant governors.”

“Oh,” Mohammed said, searching the ceiling for a number. “Twenty. Maybe thirty. Like secretaries,” he said. “Similar to secretaries.”

The assistant governor and Mohammed stood and shook hands. James stood with them, shook hands with the assistant governor.

“Kolay gelsin,” the man said, smiling. May it come easy.

James nodded, followed Mohammed out of the office.

“Where do we go now?” he asked Mohammed, when they were alone again in the hallway.

“The stamp room.”

***

The stamp room was a stifling, windowless space, the only room in the basement. Mohammed tried to push his way to the front, but this time it was impossible. Once again there was only one clerk behind the desk, though he appeared to have an assistant—a short man with a thick black

mustache, his shirtsleeves rolled up past his elbows, large damp spots under his armpits. Eventually they reached the counter and were pressed against it by the swell of bodies behind them. Mohammed spoke to the clerk and turned to James.

"Give him your residency permit," he said.

In the crush it was almost impossible. James wriggled it out of his pocket and handed it over.

The clerk flipped through the permit as though searching for something, which worried James because there was nothing inside it, no stamps beyond the first page. The sweating assistant scurried around the small space behind the desk, shifting files between cabinets, grabbing stamps off the racks, inking papers furiously, what looked to James to be indiscriminate stamping. He dropped a folder and walked over it, ignoring the spilled papers. He stopped mid-shuffle in the back of the room, pinned a mess of folders between his arm and torso, and with his free hand produced a pack of cigarettes from his breast pocket. Jamming the pack to his mouth, he pulled a cigarette out with his teeth, returned the pack to his pocket, took out a lighter, flicked it to an edge of the document he was still holding, and lit it. The paper sprouted into flame, and with it he carefully lit the cigarette, pausing to consider the burning page a moment before tossing it into a bin wedged in a corner, where it smoldered.

James was wondering if he'd really seen this when Mohammed jabbed him.

"The permit," he said. "There is a problem." The clerk waved the permit in front of James' face, said something he couldn't decipher.

"What problem?" James asked, but Mohammed was already moving toward the door. James took his permit from the clerk. "Sorun ne?" he asked. What's wrong? But the man didn't hear him, or chose not to hear him, and already was turned toward someone else.

"What did he say?" James asked, when they'd cleared the throng and were standing in the subterranean hallway. He brushed his hair from his eyes, put his hand against his forehead. It felt strangely cool. He imagined how me must look, his face drained of color, indistinguishable from the walls. If he missed his flight, he would have to see Damla again. Their next lesson was in two days. By then she might know more, might have visited a doctor or a pharmacist. She would be certain, one way or another. James wanted to sneak out while some doubt still remained, enough to shape into denial. He fought the pressure rising in his chest, willed it away.

"Your residency permit," Mohammed said. "It's missing a stamp from the police."

"What stamp?"

"A stamp to show that you live here."

"But they gave me a residency permit."

"Yes."

"Doesn't that show that I live here?"

"Yes. But without the stamp, no."

"When was I supposed to get the stamp?"

"You were supposed to get the stamp months ago. I do not know why you did not get the stamp. I will go with you now to the police station. We will try to get the stamp. But months ago, this should have been done."

They walked up to the lobby and out into the rain, toward the university administration building, where a car and a driver could take them to the police station on the edge of town. The midday call to prayer boomed from the mosques scattered throughout Ağrı, blending like voices bouncing between canyon walls.

***

In a corner of the half-acre lawn of the rektörlük, perhaps the only green space in all of Ağrı, some students sat under a gazebo. They waved to James and mispronounced his name, beckoned for him to come over, but there was no time. He was no closer to his hope of leaving the following morning. He could try to leave without the proper stamps, but when he went through customs in Istanbul, there was a good chance he'd be stopped.

He'd been warned in October after the rooftop incident. It happened his first week in Ağrı, at the first of a trio of apartment buildings the university had moved him through. He'd only wanted to photograph the sunset.

It had been a brilliant sky—violet and crimson above Ararat, as if the mountain were piercing the clouds, spilling their blood. The peak was spectacular, its crisp white crest tinged pink, its shadows purple.

James had immediately grabbed his camera and climbed the stairs of his new apartment building to the roof. Up above, the sky was unobstructed by the concrete apartment blocks that sliced it into bits and pieces from the street. Sitting on a crumbling ledge among the abandoned nests of sparrows, he snapped picture after picture. He did not see the men staring up at him from the back lot of the adjacent building, a compound that turned out to be the province intelligence headquarters and prison.

Twenty minutes later there was a knock on his door. It was the building's handyman. He looked nervous. "Gel," he said, beckoning.

He led James downstairs, where two men sat, sunk into the lobby's dingy couch, their impeccable suits out of place in Ağrı. They clasped their thick hands in front of them and leaned toward James, asked him why he was in Ağrı.

"For the hiking," he said. It was impossible to tell from their expressions just how stupid they thought he was. "Teaching English," he added, stumbling over his words.

The man leading the conversation nodded. "It is different here," he said. His words emerged lifeless and flat.

James nodded eagerly.

"And did you find what you are looking for?"

"Yes," James said, nodding harder, smiling, eyebrows raised in the hopes that they would recognize his uselessness.

"Can we see?" the man asked.

James smiled the same smile. They looked at him, waiting. It took him a moment to realize they were referring to his photos. He went upstairs for his camera. When he returned, they clicked through his pictures, deleting each one. James sat there, feeling foolish. The man James had been speaking with palmed his camera, as if pondering whether or not to crush it. Eventually, he took out the memory card, slipped it into his breast pocket, and returned the camera.

"Everything seems okay," he said.

James nodded.

"There has been violence here," the man continued. "Terrorists. Infiltrators who are not Turkish." He took a long look at James. "We are on our toes."

James smiled at his use of an idiom, then tried to stifle his reaction.

"Have you registered at the police station?"

James nodded. It was one of the first things Mohammed took him to do.

The man smiled. “Good,” he said. “When you leave here, you will need an exit stamp. If you try to leave without the stamp, you may experience difficulties,” he said, gesturing with a brief nod behind him in what James assumed to be the direction of the prison. “It would be a shame.” He shrugged. “Get the stamp,” he repeated, smiling his smile, rising to his feet.

James nodded hard.

The next day James was asked to move. A week after that, he was asked to move again. In the shuffling between apartments, James forgot about the exit stamp. The story spread, and the townspeople began to whisper about the American spy in their midst. It was Mohammed who finally found James a permanent place to live, an extra apartment the university used for storage. There was a bed and a couch and a squat toilet and that was all. Still, James was grateful.

“The driver is waiting,” Mohammed said, squeezing James’ shoulder.

They hopped in the university-owned sedan and sped to the police station as though they were being chased. They hit the traffic circle and curved east, passed the town cemetery, its gate spectral in the roadside blur. Ararat grew in the windshield. The police station appeared in the distance, a six-story fortress lording over squat cinderblock houses with corrugated metal roofs.

At the gate to the station they were halted by an officer who searched the bottom of the car with a mirror, a rifle slung over his back. Inside the compound the driver waited while Mohammed and James hurried up the stairs and into the building.

“Where are we going?” James asked.

“The yabancı office,” Mohammed said.

They took the three flights of stairs up to a floor James recognized and Mohammed banged on a door, opening it before being invited. Inside were three officers, the same three officers James knew from his many trips to the police station throughout the year. The room reeked of the counterfeit Marlboros ubiquitous throughout Ağrı. The walls were stained yellow from smoke.

"Kolay gelsin," Mohammed greeted them.

The officers were all smoking. They looked annoyed at the intrusion. One of them grunted, and Mohammed strode over to him. They spoke for a moment and Mohammed turned to James.

"He wants to know where you are from," Mohammed said.

James told him, surprised that the officer didn't remember him from previous visits. He had to be one of the only Americans to have ever applied for residency in Ağrı.

The officer said something to Mohammed.

"Give him your residency permit," Mohammed said.

James handed it over.

The officer flipped through it, said something.

"What did he say?" James asked.

"He says this proves nothing," Mohammed said.

"This proves I am a resident," James said, confused.

Mohammed conferred with the officer. "Everyone has these, he says. Everyone who lives here must have one. Without the stamp, he says, it's worthless."

"Can they stamp it now?" James asked. He still didn't know what stamp he lacked.

Mohammed asked the officer, who shook his head and spoke.

“He says there is no way to know if this is real, without the stamp,” Mohammed translated. “He says you could have made it.”

James pressed his brow. “*He* issued it in October,” he said. “*He* was the one who gave it to me.”

Mohammed said something. The officer replied, and Mohammed turned to James. “What are you doing in Ağrı, he asks,” Mohammed said.

James answered in Turkish. “Teaching English in the university.”

The officer responded immediately, looking at James but speaking so quickly he couldn’t understand. Mohammed’s eyes bulged. He slammed his fist on the table. Mohammed and the officer spat Turkish at each other.

“What’s he saying?” James asked Mohammed, wondering whether he should restrain him. Mohammed ignored James and kept arguing. Eventually he turned to him.

“He wants to know how you can be an English teacher at Ağrı University when there isn’t even a campus,” Mohammed said.

True, there was no campus. When James arrived, there were no buildings. A year later and there were still no classrooms, only the fakültesi and the rektörlük. “But you work there,” James said. “Can’t you explain what I do?” The nicotine stink, the yellow walls, the hostile officer—it was all becoming unbearable.

“I am trying,” Mohammed said. He shrugged. “He is not from here.”

The officer said something else.

“He says you cannot get the stamp until you prove that you were here.”

Proved that he was here? He’d watched the university grow before his eyes, from a dirt lot to a foundation to what it was now, which wasn’t much but was something. He moved

apartments three times. He lived without water for weeks, without electricity for hours each day. He sweated and stank with the townspeople in the summer heat, coughed with them through the coal-choked winter nights. He drank tea with imams and professors, smoked nargile with students. And then there was Damla.

The succession of images shimmered in James' mind. He felt dizzy, unable to keep his head upright. He stumbled forward, hands out. Mohammed caught him by his arm. As he leaned on Mohammed, he heard him say the word for mother and the word for cancer. He thought of Damla, of what might be growing inside her.

The officer spoke, his tone seeming to soften slightly.

Mohammed helped James back to his feet. "Okay," he said. "He says you can get the stamp."

"Okay," James said, ashamed.

"But first we must get a letter from the rector saying you teach there."

James froze. Visiting the rector's office meant seeing Damla. Outside he could hear the faint chant of the afternoon call to prayer mixing with fainter rumblings of thunder. "But there's no time."

"We must," Mohammed said. "This is the only way."

On the ride back to town they were delayed by a shepherd sweeping his flock across the highway, sheep wandering across the asphalt, slipping in the muddy pitch on each side of the road.

***

In the waiting room outside the rector's office, Damla informed them that he was on a phone call. Her eyes returned to her computer screen immediately after she'd answered her uncle. She

seemed distant, but then, this was always how she acted in public. Only in James' apartment was she different, no longer afraid of publically creating the appearance of what happened to be true.

"This is important," Mohammed said. He seemed concerned—the joy in his voice, the jokes from previous conversations with Damla and James were worryingly absent.

"What is it?" she asked, looking up at Mohammed. She cocked her head slightly, turned to James. He caught confusion in her stare before she turned back to her uncle. He could see that despite her innocent, capable demeanor, she sensed something was wrong. James rarely visited the rektörlük, avoided running into her anywhere some slight, instinctive gesture might give them away. It was important for both of them to keep up appearances.

"It's for James," Mohammed said, nodding at him. "The police need a note from the rector."

"The police?" Damla asked. James felt the fear in her tone, the alarm. She was expecting the worst. That Mohammed had somehow discovered them. That the police were now involved. James was sure of it.

"To prove I live here," James said, cutting in before Mohammed could answer.

Mohammed laughed. "Yes," he said. "For the exit stamp."

James watched Damla's eyes widen. She ducked her head, hid her expression from them. James felt his shoulders slump, his face flush. The floor shifted, and he was floating. Mohammed took a step forward until he was beside them. He put a hand on James' shoulder as though to calm some new storm within. Mohammed stared at Damla, looked to James. James knew he needed to end this moment, disperse the tension neither he nor Damla was hiding well.

"Can we talk?" James asked Mohammed, before anyone could speak.

He nodded. James led Mohammed to the other side of the room, out of earshot, then turned. “One moment,” James said, as Mohammed sat down. “I forgot to say something to Damla.”

“What is it?” Mohammed asked, ready to stand again.

“I just want to explain our hurry,” James said. He watched some darker emotion move across Mohammed’s face, mistrust or doubt, though it passed quickly, chased across his protuberant cheekbones and wide forehead by his more familiar affability. He lifted his leg, placed it delicately over the other. “Okay,” Mohammed said, a little forcefully, as though pushing a thought from his mind.

James turned and walked back across the room, each step like a sentence. His head was ringing—the tidal friction of being stuck between Mohamed and Damla threatening to pull it apart. When he reached Damla she had raised her face just enough to stare into the refuge of her screen. “Damla,” he said.

As soon as she looked at him he wished she would look away again. Her face, shielded from Mohammed by James, held the look of their private meetings: open, trusting, shy and frank at once. “What is happening?” she whispered.

“It’s complicated,” James said. “Something’s come up.” He glanced over his shoulder at Mohammed, who seemed to be staring intently through the walls of the windowless space, deliberately unhearing. “Do you have news?” James hissed, suddenly, quietly.

“It’s been a day,” Damla said. She seemed calm, alarmed at James’ panic. “I know what you know,” she said. “Where are you going?”

“My mother is sick,” James said. Mohammed and Damla shrank and then vanished from the room and there was only each word in his mind, words he held in his mouth like stones

before plucking each from his tongue and placing them before him into a path out of this place. None of it was real. “I knew before you came yesterday. I’d already made the plans.” James spoke very calmly and quietly, like he was coaxing a child. “I’m leaving but I’m coming back. By then you’ll know. But now I have my flight. This visit. And this stamp,” he paused, took a breath. “I need it.” He swallowed.

“I don’t understand,” Damla said. “You’re leaving?”

“I’m coming back.”

“When?”

Mohammed coughed, and suddenly he was back in the room and whatever James was building risked coming undone.

“I need the stamp, Damla.”

She stared at him. It had already been almost an hour since they’d left the police station.

There was only one left.

“You have to get me into that room.”

“What does my uncle know?” Damla asked, moving slightly in her chair so she could glance around James.

“Nothing yet.” James said. “He’s been helpful,” he added.

“He likes you.”

James looked down at the desk. He looked back up, into her face. “Help me. Please.”

Damla stared at James. It was a gaze James was reluctant to break—no matter how much he wanted to turn away, look at anything else—as though if he stretched the moment long enough it would be possible to atone for what was coming. She pursed her lips, nodded. She seemed to slump, slightly, the way she did whenever she was about to stand after being seated, to

turn inward, as though to draw strength once more to move through the world upright. When James first noticed this habit he was proud of this observation, and he smiled, even now, recognizing it.

But Damla did not stand, or return his smile. “Okay,” she said, eventually. “I understand. Sit. I will speak with the rector.”

James’ eyes settled on her headscarf, its silk sheen a deep purple. He leaned forward for a moment, as though he might bend over and kiss her, but he backed away a few steps before turning toward Mohammed. He heard the door to the rector’s office open and close behind him, and when he reached Mohammed and turned to sit beside him, Damla had gone.

“Is everything okay?” Mohammed asked. He appeared torn between two emotions. The encouragement he usually applied to any mention of James’ tutelage of Damla—to the relationship James had felt veritably pushed into by circumstances, Mohammed’s constant barrage of little insinuations—and something new. Suspicion, maybe.

“Sure,” James said, staring at the closed door.

“Good,” he said, more to himself than James. They sat in silence. The room was stifling. “It will be difficult finding someone for Damla,” Mohammed said, after a moment.

“What do you mean?” James asked, hearing his voice waver.

“You have given her a lot.” Mohammed paused. “James,” he said. James had noticed that Mohammed spoke his name whenever he was about to pry or confide. He braced for what might come. “I hope it wasn’t too much work. Teaching her.” He nodded slightly in Damla’s direction. “She can be strong.”

“Stubborn?” James asked, relieved.

Mohammed nodded, as though he'd spoken the word. "She knows before others, or thinks she does. Before anyone." He raised his eyebrows. "For everything."

"I'm the opposite," James said, surprised at the truth of his admission.

Mohammed smiled, as though pleased with himself. "That's why you get along so well." He paused. "You get along well?" He cocked his head, as though anticipating an unpleasant reply.

"Of course," James said.

"I thought so," Mohammed leaned back. He put his arm around James, found a knot just beneath his shoulder blade, pressed into it with his thumb.

James closed his eyes to the pain, hoping his face wouldn't betray him.

"A good sign," Mohammed said, when he finally released his grip. "For her future. Perhaps she will study one day in America." He removed his arm, brought his hands together before him, looked down at them, clasped, in his lap. He smiled slightly. James wasn't certain what floated, unspoken, between them, but felt he needed to address it. "It isn't her," James whispered. He was sweating. "Why I'm leaving."

"Of course," Mohammed said.

It wasn't. At least not yet. It was just time. It was easy to tell himself these things when truthfully, he didn't know. "I wouldn't leave if I didn't have to," James said. He waved his hand, ashamed, as he did so, at the motion. He wondered if it appeared as unearned and unconvincing as it felt. He wondered if he loved Damla. He believed he might. But what did it mean that more than anything else he wanted to run? He tried to imagine settling down, teaching, starting his own school. This life, forever. He could almost see it: strolls through the Kent Ormanı with Damla in the smog-enhanced evening light, weekend picnics at its edge of bazlama and grilled

eggplant and chicken and Damla's kısır; sharing his apartment with its cramped kitchen and slight bathroom—its squat toilet and the shower hose directly above, snaking her hair from the floor drain, Damla hovering in the doorway, apologizing like she did now, lamenting the pipes, the plumbing. Her features out of focus, her expression vague. No child in sight.

"You've helped," Mohammed said, chasing the vision before it could settle, his voice firm and final. For a moment, James wanted to throw his arms around Mohammed and thank him. "With American English, she is more free." He smiled, patted James' knee. "You will be difficult to replace."

James wanted to say something like you'll manage or Damla will be fine, but he couldn't. A wave of nausea stronger than what he felt in front of Mohammed's building or in the police station rose inside him, and he rocked in his chair.

Mohammed placed his hand on his back. "We will finish this," he said. "It will be fine."

James wanted to tell him it wouldn't, but he knew that they existed, in that moment, on separate planes of understanding.

The door to the rector's office opened and Damla returned to her place behind her desk. "Okay," she said, staring into her screen. "The rector is waiting."

James waited for that slight curl, that turn inward, for Damla to rise, for some final gesture. A goodbye. It didn't come. She stayed seated, her back arched, her eyes on her screen, hair hidden under her silk headscarf, empurpled and shining in the fluorescent light.

***

The rector's office was by far the largest in the university. It was the only room in the whole place that looked like a university office, with its leather chairs and bookshelves and framed

degrees, though it seemed a little too exact, like a catalog image of how a university office should look.

The rector stood up behind his desk, smiled, and addressed them.

Mohammed explained to the rector what James needed.

"You're leaving," the rector said.

James nodded.

The rector produced a legal pad from a drawer and scribbled a note on the top sheet. He dated and signed it, ripped it free, and handed it to Mohammed. "Will you miss Ağrı?" he asked.

"Very much," James replied, hoping to seem earnest. He would miss seeing Damla hunched over one of her papers, her thin lips pursed, intently considering his edits. He imagined her on an examination table, hands pressed against her thighs, her nails that light and airy blue. Her face empty. Ten weeks seemed like a small window—he hoped she would have enough time.

They stood and shook hands, and James wondered if this note, scribbled in all of thirty seconds, would prove anything to the officer. He doubted it, but you could never tell. Sometimes things like this worked. He tried to glance at the note in Mohammed's hand, but he couldn't read much Turkish, and besides, it was from the rector, and if that wasn't good enough, nothing would be.

At the yabancı office, the officer raised an eyebrow at their reentrance. He dropped his newspaper and shifted in his seat. Mohammed handed him the letter. He glanced at it, dropped it on his desk.

The officer spoke and James could make out the words *impossible, two hours, tomorrow.*

"He is saying the office is closed," Mohammed said to James. "That this takes two hours and they cannot do this today."

"But we only need one stamp," James said, raising his hands in appeal. "How long can that take?"

Mohammed shrugged.

Something in James' throat made it hurt to swallow. The letter from the rector hadn't mattered. The officer hadn't read it. He'd just wanted to make things harder.

Mohammed said something. The other officers shifted in their chairs. The officer speaking with him shrugged, replied.

"He says that it might be possible to obtain the stamp today," Mohammed said. "He says maybe he can do it, for a processing fee."

So it was a bribe. James didn't care. "How much?"

Mohammed asked.

"Two hundred lira."

"Fine," James said. "I will pay." James repeated this in Turkish to the officer, who smiled and asked for his permit. James handed it over with the two hundred lira, most of his last cash, and the officer disappeared from the room. Two minutes later he was back with the stamped permit.

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As they reentered the administration building clerks brushed by them, heading home, their shoes squeaking with each step on the slick tile. The tattered cardboard from the morning had been replaced with fresh panels.

Mohammed and James descended the corner staircase to the basement and entered the stamp room, empty but for a few old men clustered together near the counter. The clerk behind the desk pecked away at his keyboard. His assistant scrambled between cabinets, filing documents.

James looked behind the counter for the bin with the singed paper from the morning, but it was gone. As Mohammed talked to the clerk, James watched the assistant, waited for him to pull out his cigarettes, to confirm what he was sure he'd seen earlier, but the small, hovering man just went about his business, opening cabinets, removing files, flipping through papers, stacking some on the table, moving others to drawers, stamping.

Mohammed jabbed James.

"What?"

Mohammed sighed. "Your residency permit."

James reached into his pocket to once again hand his permit across a counter for inspection. The clerk took the permit and flipped it open to a random page, produced a stamp from a drawer, inked it and stamped the permit. He handed it back.

Mohammed thanked the man and returned it to James.

"That's it?" James asked, stunned, accepting the permit.

"Yes."

"He didn't even check—" James started, but stopped. There was no point. There was no sense to be made. This was Ağrı.

"Come," Mohammed said, already moving toward the door.

As they left the building and strode outside, they heard, like chanted déjà vu, the call to prayer rising above the rooftops, sounding through the streets, the apartment blocks and

teahouses, restaurants and internet cafés. They paused on the steps and listened to its echoes until they died away, and Mohammed spoke.

"There is nothing left," he said, hands on his hips, squinting up at one of the unfinished minarets of the central mosque. He turned toward James and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Very unusual for such a stamp to be issued so quickly," he said. "I have never seen it." He laughed. "Although no one here has reason to get one." He looked at James.

James searched Mohammed's face. The purpose it held earlier was gone. Replaced, James thought, with that defeated look he'd grown accustomed to seeing in everyone else in Ağrı, though it could have been a trick of the fading light. James tried to imagine how Mohammed or Damla might leave. Where they would go. Istanbul seemed expensive and vast and distant. The border with Armenia was closed. Syria's too. South and east insurgency festered as the government razed whole Kurdish villages. There was Nakhchivan, maybe, but who would trade this for that? Its Azeris flooded Ağrı and its neighboring provinces for jobs and health clinics, for towns with heating fuel in the winter. In the end, there was only Ağrı, and, on the horizon, below a forever-blue sky like an upturned sea, Ararat.

"Perhaps it's better to stay," James said. "To live close to home. To family. My mother is alone. Damla has you."

Mohammed pursed his lips, nodded. "Tell me," he said. "Would you do this for me? In America?"

"It would be different," James said. He regretted his answer immediately.

"Of course," Mohammed said, dropping his hand, lowering his eyes. He moved toward the street, his long strides now a weary shuffle.

James hurried to catch up, an idea forming. "Would you do this for Damla?" he asked.

Mohammed slowed, smiling as though at some memory. “She would not need my help.”

“But if she did,” James said.

“Of course.” Mohammed stopped, looked at James. “But she will be fine,” a hint of a question in his voice, or accusation. “She is family.”

James nodded. “Family is important,” he said, convinced Mohammed loved Damla—that he’d protect her, do what was necessary. “Ağrı is a good place to call home.”

James tried to believe what he said. It was possible the funds for the university that Mohammed so often talked about would come through. That Damla would spend time studying in Europe, even America. It had to be. James wanted to say something, voice outrage at the constraints that would bind Damla—a woman in eastern Turkey—for the rest of her life. The injustices she would face, his hope that Mohammed would help her through it. He opened his mouth to speak, but Mohammed held up his hand. Simply, deliberately, he spoke.

“Here I am busy. There is a university to build. Maybe Damla,” he said, adjusting his glasses. “Maybe she will be the one to be free.”

“I hope,” James said. He forced a smile.

Mohammed nodded once, as though to himself. “Yes.” he said. “I can picture it.” He broke into another of his grins, but James didn’t see it. He had already turned away, toward home, where no one was expecting him.

C. Aralik

Over the year I'd spent with Ahmet I'd only seen what could be called intent in his eyes briefly, just once, toward the end of my time in eastern Turkey. He was a man of absence. If you grew comfortable with this fact he became your friend. I had no choice. I knew no one else in that town.

I met Ahmet in Iğdır. I had moved there from Gaziantep after a Foreign Service Officer found me a teaching position at Iğdır University. He was tall, and thin, a graduate student from Aralık, a village a few hours southeast of town. He wore white dress shirts that were always pressed and tucked into his slacks, billowing shirts that gave only the faintest hint of a body beneath. He was writing his thesis on some aspect of the province's soil. He seemed more of an idea than a man.

Iğdır University was two years old and existed, more or less, on the fifth and sixth floors of an abandoned shopping complex in the center of town. The days were dusty and the sun hung as if on a rusty wire, moving across the sky at an interminable pace. Dust blanketed everything. The buildings were layered with it, as were the streets. I tasted it in the food. It made its way into the water, the air, even my mind, which makes me wonder if I am misremembering certain people, or places, or occurrences. When it rained the unpaved streets and empty lots turned to mud.

The rector of the university was a plump man who had spent four years studying in Texas. He had a dark mustache and thick eyebrows that rose and fell with the intonation of his hoarse voice. He seemed eager and incompetent. The day I arrived, after tea in his office, he passed me off to Ahmet, who took me to my university lodging, a decrepit *öğretmenevi* on the edge of town, a block away from the north-south highway that cut Iğdır in half and led to places

like Tuzluca and Kars and Doğubeyazıt. From my window I could see the highway leading off into the distance, running parallel to the plateau that formed Ararat, which also ran north and south, as though everything in that part of the world ran north and south and there was no other choice, no other direction. At night the headlights of trucks beaded the dark road, their engines roaring as they zoomed in and out of town. Clusters of lights marking distant villages dotted the hills. I'd stand by the window, looking out at the desert and the highway and the wavering lights, fingering the American flag pin my father had given me the day I left Washington, almost two years before.

In the mornings Ahmet would come for me at the *öğretmenevi*. We walked everywhere. We would wander the streets and alleys, stopping at different teahouses, and eventually for *börek* or *simit*. Our conversations always started the same way. In each teahouse Ahmet would explain the specific process each owner used to make tea, and how it differed from the others, and how it was better or worse. Then he would talk about the Black Sea coast, how the closer you got to it the fresher the tea became. That would lead him to describe the *hamsi* from Trabzon and the *mantı* from Sinop. Then he would talk about his thesis and how when he was finished he wanted to move back to Poland, where the girl he had met during his Erasmus year lived. His tone always grew serious when he brought her up. He would speak about the emails she sent him, and sometimes even bring a copy, ask me to read it and tell him what I thought. I would tell him that I wasn't good with women, but he would insist, slide the pages across the splintery table of whichever teahouse we were in. Her responses were vague and overly polite. It was immediately clear she was trying to distance herself. Each email surprised me—the many ways she had to say nothing, promise nothing. I tried to sound both uncertain and positive. We never made much progress.

After the fourth or fifth stop we would head across town to the *rektörlük,* where I taught the university's agriculture professors. There was a fence around the building, and a security gate at its only entrance. Students stood in clusters on the courtyard's patchy grass. There was a gazebo and a pile of bricks and that was it.

At night I had trouble falling asleep. I would lie awake in the early morning hours terrified of the stillness before the call to prayer. Its warble seemed forever imminent. I would close my eyes and wait in dread for its first notes, unable to relax until it had passed. After it came I would fall asleep until my neighbor switched on the morning news, or whatever it was he watched at full volume, and the sound would thump through the walls. A little later Ahmet would come for me and we would start our routine. Whatever the cause, I couldn't sleep. I had nightmares. My eyes started retreating into my skull.

One day Ahmet asked me what was wrong.

"I'm having trouble sleeping," I said. "I miss home," I added, after a moment.

"You miss home," he said. His tone was flat, devoid of everything but the words themselves. I couldn't tell if he was questioning me, mocking me, or even determining if and how he could help me. An impossible determination to make, yet somehow I felt it held the key to everything that followed.

"Would you like to come to Aralık?" he asked. "To see my home?"

I didn't. It was far, most likely, and I was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to sit in my room and imagine my impending return home. What my first meal would be. Who I would visit.

"Sure," I said.

We left that afternoon, in Ahmet's rusted Iranian sedan. Halfway to Aralık the left front tire went flat. Ahmet and I got out to replace it. While we were changing it a man in a gray suit biked past us. I wondered where he was going. There didn't seem to be a house around for miles. Eventually we fixed the wheel and continued on our way. When we were almost there it started to rain, a shower that smeared the layer of dust on the windshield, creating a grainy paste that was impossible to see through or clear with the wipers. Ahmet cranked his window down and stuck his head out and drove like that the rest of the way.

In the village there were cows in the street, and deep puddles in the potholes. At scattered tables in front of storefronts, and on rickety staircases leading to second floor rooms and sometimes to nowhere at all, men hunched on low stools around low tables, holding tea cups, handling prayer beads, watching the sporadic cars that came and went down the main street.

We pulled up to Ahmet's home, a low cinderblock structure with a rusted metal roof. Ahmet told me we were even farther east than Iğdır. Right up against Armenia. He pointed down one end of the street, into the middle distance, past a stream and a clump of trees too sparse and scraggly to be a wood, and said it was just over there. That we could head through the trees and look at the line that separated the countries.

"Is it safe?" I asked.

He thought for a moment, nodded.

His mother was cooking when we walked in. She smiled at me and shook my hand slowly. I wondered if this was for me or if it was how she normally greeted guests. The floor was covered with rugs, and from where I stood in the front room I could see into the kitchen. She said something to Ahmet and he nodded.

"We will eat in thirty minutes," he said.

He spoke to his mother, turned, and went out the door, motioning for me to follow. We walked through the yard, past a strutting rooster and out the front gate. Some children were playing soccer in the street. They paused to let us pass, watching us in silence. We crossed the main avenue and continued down into a ditch and over a crude bridge of stones across the stagnant water of the stream, which upon closer examination was really more of a canal, or maybe a drainage ditch. We wandered through the copse of trees and then up a hillock where ahead of us stood a rotting guard shack and some spindly posts linked by rusted razor wire. I had never seen a military front before and it looked just as barren as I had always imagined one would. There was a sign with a cartoonish picture of a uniformed soldier warning, in Turkish, not to approach any further. I asked Ahmet if there were landmines and he shook his head.

"It's not that kind of border," he said. "Besides, this is not yet it."

In the distance we could see a guard tower and something glinting in the late afternoon sunlight that I imagined to be a tank, but was probably just a truck, or maybe a jeep. We stood for a moment in silence, looking off toward the east, toward the Armenian side. The land looked no different. A sluggish river winding through the cracked earth, a few low trees here and there, some bushes. Then Ahmet spoke.

"There," he said. "Do you see that?" He was pointing off past the guard tower. I squinted and tried to follow the imaginary line that connected his finger to whatever it was he was signaling at, but it was hard to see, even though the sun was behind us.

"What is it?" I asked.

"There," Ahmet said, still pointing.

And then I saw it, but only for the scattered cars parked beside it sparkling in the light. A church. Rounded domes, brown shingles, a burnt-red façade. I imagined all of this, of course. It

was too far away to see any detail. Really, it could have been anything. But Ahmet told me it was a church. One of the most famous in Armenia, or oldest, or most important. We stood staring for a while. Then Ahmet said that dinner was probably ready, and we turned and retraced our path back toward the village.

We ate in near silence on the floor of the front room. Ahmet's mother appeared only to bring more *tavuk sote* and *lavaş* or to clear away dishes. By the time we had eaten and had tea it was late. Ahmet rose and said it was probably best that we return. I thanked Ahmet's mother and said goodbye. We walked outside and Ahmet abruptly stopped. He told me to wait, and disappeared inside. The village was silent, except for a dog barking in the distance. There was a full moon, or a near full moon. In its light Ararat was easy to find. A heavy presence on the horizon, reaching up past a house at the opposite end of the street from the path we had taken that afternoon. An enormous mound, all muscle and rock. There were no stars in the sky, a symptom of the smog that plagued all of the villages and towns in the east. Finally Ahmet reemerged. He apologized, and we walked to his car.

Neither of us spoke for a while. Then, about half an hour after we left his village, Ahmet started talking about his mother, and Iğdır, and the girl from Poland he had met, or was friends with, or had slept with.

"Between the border and the mountain there isn't anywhere to go," he said.

I nodded.

"Of course this isn't true," he said. "There are roads. An airport in Erzurum."

"Yes," I said. In that moment I was thinking of that airport, how soon I could make it there, where I could go.

"I would leave," he said, as though guessing my thoughts. "But there is my mother."

He didn't need to tell me she was sick. I already knew. It was the smell of the house, as thickly settled as Iğdır's dust. Ahmet removed a tape from his breast pocket and put it in the cassette player and turned up the volume. Through the scratchy speakers I heard a woman's voice over a sparse beat.

"That's her," he said.

I didn't understand.

"Ania. The girl from Poland."

"Ah," I said.

"She sings," he said. "Sometimes she travels to sing. She nearly came to Istanbul last year. I told her if she did I would come see her."

"That's nice," I said, staring out the window at the landscape blurring past. The horizon seemed to be glowing, almost imperceptibly, as if some object at the smudged meeting of land and sky were giving off a precious and delicate energy.

"When I was with her in Krakow we were inseparable," Ahmet said. "We spent whole nights walking around the city. She told me everything about her life. Then the sun would come up and we would wander into one of the city's cheap cafeterias. I think they were called milk bars. We would drink coffee and eat little pastries. She even took me to her hometown. I taught her brothers how to make *gözleme*."

I tried to picture Ahmet and this girl, imagine his feeling toward her, his feeling toward his home, what it would be like to grow up here, grow old. I wondered if I could do it. One of the girls who taught English at the university was pretty. I imagined settling down with her, working at the university, maybe even starting my own school. I squeezed the flag pin in my pocket, felt the prick of its pointed edges on my fingertips.

The song ended and Ahmet removed the tape from the player and returned it to his breast pocket. The highway began to curve. Soon we would be approaching the outskirts of Iğdır. We passed a shuttered fruit stand, the charred remains of a house.

"Do you have a minute?" Ahmet asked. "I want to show you something."

I shrugged, and immediately realized I should have been more affirmative. "Yes," I said, a little too forcefully.

He pulled off the highway and onto a dirt track. We rumbled for a few minutes, bouncing up and down on the car's worn suspension as we rolled over the pockmarked route. We crested a slight rise and Ahmet pulled to a stop. He turned off the car and got out. I followed. The moonlight seemed weaker here, as though the plateau had taken it and scattered it, dispersed it in ever-decreasing amounts until its effect was negligible. It was almost impossible to see more than a step ahead. I felt as though we were being watched, then felt immediately embarrassed for thinking this. Ahmet led the way with a sureness that made me certain he had done this many times.

We walked beside a row of bare trees and then I glimpsed what I presumed to be our destination, its angular shape almost indistinguishable from the pitch black night surrounding it, shadow upon shadow. The outline of its lone minaret pierced the emptiness.

The mosque's walls were unpainted cinderblock. It was clear that the building had been abandoned while still under construction. Many of the mosques in town were like this: suspended in some indeterminate state. Still, the structure had a charge to it.

We entered through the gap where the door should have been. The floor was packed dirt. A pile of smashed wooden crates in one corner, a mound of trash in another, ashes and charred wood scattered in a loose, hurried pattern. It looked hastily abandoned. I wanted to ask Ahmet

why we were here, but my voice felt stuck, as though it had dried in my throat. I tried to cough and something hoarse and not quite human came out.

"Come," Ahmet said, and led me through the vacant space. I could not see the doorway or the crude cement steps spiraling upward into the emptiness until we were upon them. The minaret. Ahmet started up its staircase.

"Come," he said again, as though chanting. The steps were uneven. I had to feel my way against the wall as I climbed. At any moment I thought the wall I was pressing against would give out, and I would fall toward the earth in an avalanche of cinderblock and mortar.

We emerged from a small doorway onto a crude crow's nest of cement and wood planking about forty feet above the ground.

"This is a very special place," Ahmet said. He spoke staring straight ahead, as though addressing someone out in the darkness, or maybe someone in his mind. He raised his hand slowly, as if cupping something, then extended his finger and pointed off at the horizon, alive with the distant, wavering lights of Armenia's capital.

We stood for a moment in silence. Then Ahmet spoke.

"When my mother can live without my help I'll return for Ania," he said.

I knew Ahmet would never leave, that his mother would die soon, and that Ania would exist, for the rest of his life, in the sad scratch of a cassette and the distant glow of a city across a closed border. At the time, I thought he couldn't see this, and that's what gave him such power. His oblivion, willful or otherwise, at the sad details of his life, looking out across the border at the lights of a city a world away. A city only he could see.

"You are leaving soon?" he asked.

I nodded.

"When?"

"When the semester ends."

"You miss home."

I nodded.

"I would also leave."

I searched for something to say.

"I know," Ahmet said. He smiled.

"Here," I said, reaching into my pocket for the pin.

It was a pathetic gesture. I knew it as soon as I spoke, but it was too late to stop. Ahmet took the pin, turned it in his fingers. He nodded, whether in acknowledgement of the gift, or in resignation that after all he'd shared with me this trinket was what I chose to give him. What he said next I've been turning in my head ever since.

"Sometimes, up here, I feel as though that is not Yerevan, that this is not Turkey. That if I jump I will not fall," he said. "That I will just . . ." and he trailed off, made a motion suggesting he would just float away, or maybe that he couldn't find the right words in English, or even that the right words didn't exist.

"Maybe I will leave soon, too," he said, after a long silence. He pinned the flag to his shirt. We turned and descended the spiraling stairs.

D. The Gone and the Going Away

Through the small window in her mother's kitchen, the back lot is barren. No trees, no grass. Nothing grows. November is always cold in Iğdır, always gray. Her mother moves into the doorway. Ceylan can feel her, the disturbance of air.

"It would be nice," her mother says, "to make aşure for Aisha."

Ceylan nods, hoping that's the end of it. She's already washed and boiled the barley, chickpeas, and kidney beans. They sit on the stove, cooling in their pots.

"She was almost your mother-in-law."

"Mother," Ceylan says, leaving the rest unspoken. Her mother reminds her each year when she returns for the ten days of Aşura, as though expecting her to have forgotten what could have been, the family she would have joined.

"She might not recognize you this year." She pauses. "It has never been this bad."

Her mother floats away. Ceylan feels the air shift once more, and thinks, if Aisha can no longer remember her, is she free to let it fade? She's tired of embellishing a past that never was, wonders whether this year, this trip, she should explain to her mother and Aisha what she and Ilyas really were. The way her mother speaks about it, it's as though Ceylan, too, was lost in the roll and tumble of that bus down that gully.

There's no scientific method for culling through memory and removing false growths. The only way, it seems, is to let it all go, the way Aisha has done. Leave nothing to linger on, joyful or otherwise. Unlike her mother, Aisha seems to have learned how to shed memory, though Ceylan knows, of course, that she hasn't. Alzheimer's isn't elective. Still, in this case it seems merciful.

“Iğdır,” Ceylan’s classmates in Ankara start, before trailing off. They’re doctoral students, aspiring scientists, and uninformed conjecture won’t do. They turn toward her, hoping for stories of danger or unrest in her descriptions of her hometown. But there aren’t any, really. Just dust. Thin sheets suspended in the air like wispy prisms, bending the appearance of things to make them look different, however slightly, from past visits. Buildings and streets seem shifted. Each year the seventeen-hour bus ride from Ankara a drift into some distant time and place. Ceylan wonders if she really grew up here. If the high school, for instance, was once hers, or if the goal posts behind it ever had a net, or even whether that was really where she first kissed Ilyas.

Ceylan waits until her mother is busy before she leaves the apartment. She imagines the shock on her classmates’ faces—a woman, alone, cutting through dark eastern streets without a headscarf. Women cover their heads here, almost all of them. Her mother expects her to, but she stopped covering up years ago. She’s a scientist now, she tells her, omitting other developments, the nights out dancing, the western boyfriends.

Yeni Sokak is dim. The last working streetlamp pulses light as though each flicker might be its last. Aisha’s third-story window is lighted. She lives alone. Her eldest son has gone west, not likely to return, and Ilyas, of course, is dead. She never mentions their father, or what she remembers of him. A wife without a husband, a mother without her children. Left to fade into the walls.

From the street it’s impossible to tell if Aisha is up, but Ceylan knows she’ll need to see her, if not today, tomorrow. Until she tells her the truth, she’s the daughter-in-law that never was, the living connection to her son. Each year it’s more draining to lie, to fill Aisha’s slipping mind with false details. She stands in the street for a long time, wondering what it would be like to tell the truth, attempting to summon the energy, but she can’t, so she drifts away, to the blood-

red nargile house at the end of the block, shedding its chipping veneer as though it, too, wishes to absolve itself of memory, to return to something nameless and indistinguishable.

Growing up, girls rarely entered. But Ceylan had always come with Ilyas, whose older brother owned the place. He shunted them to the backyard and its crabgrass, to one of three crooked lean-tos wedged against a brick wall, musty carpets under the slanted metal roofs. He only ever offered the rustiest pipe, the oldest tobacco. Ilyas would always wait until his brother had reentered the house before making a show of indignation.

During Aşura, when the whole house and backyard filled, they'd smoke and stare at the strange faces around them, thrilled to be anonymous. So many out-of-towners converged on Iğdır for the holiday that every space was full, every shop and restaurant subsumed by the tide of families flowing from the countryside, Shia who had moved from Nahçıvan and now lived in the surrounding province. They swamped the streets, the teahouses, the nargile house. The cracked square in the center of town with its makeshift Aşura tent, the park beside it where locals had stopped playing backgammon on account of the cold. Ilyas's brother sold the space when he left for Antalya, and it became a gaming cafe.

It's crowded for a Tuesday night. Kids cluster around televisions, shooting zombies or scoring goals. A few eye Ceylan as she enters, wondering whose older sister has come to ruin the fun. She ignores their stares, heads for the back door out of habit.

The backyard is quiet and empty. The rusting lean-tos sag in the darkness, just as they had the final time she'd come with Ilyas, and he'd revealed his dream.

"Someday I'll open my own nargile house," he said. He sucked air through the hose, working to help the coals catch, the water in the pipe's base effervescent from his effort.

"Here?" Ceylan asked.

He smiled. “Somewhere else. Somewhere sunny. Close to water.” He’d inherited his mother’s thick dark hair and brown eyes.

“Antalya?” she asked. “Bodrum?” She named the seaside resort towns on the other side of the country as they came to her. She too wanted to escape Iğdır, its rigid morals and unchanging rituals, the dark matter that seemed to fix everyone and everything in place.

“Sure,” he said, after each one. “Just not here.”

She told him about his lungs, their millions of alveoli, how they absorbed smoke like little balloons, holding it long after he exhaled.

He laughed. “How do you know these things?” he asked.

She shrugged, embarrassed by her obsession with the functions of the body, the invisible processes happening within each without pause. Unsure how to share her news, the exit she’d secured. She would be leaving in the fall to study biology in Ankara. “It is my ticket to university,” she said, quietly, hoping he’d understand.

“Lungs?” he asked, laughing, feigning gasps.

“Lungs,” she said.

He smiled, inhaled deeply from the pipe. “So this,” he said, holding in the smoke, so that his voice came out raspy. “This will be in you long after today.” And he bent toward her, exhaled smoke into her face, and broke into laughter, and she smiled, breathed in his air, and wondered how long that might be.

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When Ceylan arrives home, her mother is watching one of her diziler. She has a hard time sleeping, living alone. Ceylan watches the light from the television dance on her mother’s pale skin, wonders if it would darken if she got out more. Her mother doesn’t mind the emptiness, the

quiet, as far as Ceylan can tell. Her father left when he found God, the Christian one, and moved south to help spread his newly found faith alongside the woman who'd converted him. He left a careful note on a page he'd ripped from Ceylan's biology notebook. She found her mother holding it, rubbing the paper between her thumb and index finger as though testing its permanence. When she saw Ceylan, she placed it on the stovetop and glided into the living room. Ceylan switched on the burner, and it caught, ashes tumbling on the air, rising in lazy circles toward the ceiling.

"You're up."

"Did you stop in to see your teyze?"

"Her window was dark."

"A shame," her mother says. "She should leave the light on for you."

Ceylan nods. She knows they're close, knows what it is that brought them together. Loss. The men who swept through their lives. Ilyas and I weren't what you think, she wants to say. Toward the end we weren't even close. When she finally told him about her scholarship, he stopped talking to her, started avoiding her. The summer before leaving for Ankara, she couldn't find him anywhere. They didn't speak for nearly three years, until the week before his trip to Bodrum, where he was traveling to find work as a waiter at one of the resorts on the Aegean coast. He was stopping in Ankara for a night and wanted to see her, as if those years hadn't happened, the distance hadn't calcified. When she asked him why he wasn't following his brother to Antalya, he laughed.

"Listen," he said. "I need to tell you something."

"What is it?" she asked, worried.

He cleared his throat. When he finally spoke she could almost feel the heat from his blush through the phone. “I told my mother I’m coming for you.”

Ceylan swallowed. A part of her hated that he was using her like this, sharing his burden, implicating her in his cowardice. Still, she’d always known one of them might one day use the other, if necessary, to escape. It was a central tenet of their friendship, part of what had kept them close. She listened to his explanation.

“I’m her last son,” Ilyas said. Once he left, she would be alone. He couldn’t leave her without something to comfort her. He needed this lie, needed his mother to imagine him, in the wake of his absence, setting off for Ceylan.

“Can I still visit?” he asked. When she didn’t speak, he continued, “One night. Then I’ll keep going and you’ll never see me again.”

“Don’t be dramatic,” she said, finally. She asked him how his mother responded.

“That she knew I would end up with you,” he answered.

Ceylan laughed. It felt good to be speaking to him again. She asked him how he’d break the news—that he would be living and working on the coast, a day’s bus ride from the hazy sprawl of Ankara.

“Who knows,” he said. “I’ll figure it out.”

She told him she’d see him at the station. And that was it.

“A shame,” her mother says again, pulling Ceylan from her thoughts. She presses her thin hands against the folds of her headscarf. Even at home she covers herself. “I might have been a grandmother by now.” She keeps the conversation from sputtering so she can remind Ceylan how Ilyas was on his way to Ankara to ask for her hand, how he would have brought her back, how wonderful it would have been to have them both in Iğdır, to have grandchildren to visit,

adding to the imaginary sequence of events that has had yet another year to take shape in her mind. A tumor growing in the dark.

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In the morning, her mother asks Ceylan to take her to the grocery store. She needs some figs for the aşure. Ceylan has stopped asking why they still do this every year for Aisha. Ceylan and her mother were never very religious, though her father claimed to be. He'd come back wild-eyed and full of sorrow after whipping himself in the square along with the other men. It might have helped him live with himself and the way he treated her mother, the ten days of mourning and self-flagellation, promising her more as she cleaned and dressed his raw back. Now, without him, she seems rubbed thin. Spent. It's hard to remember the mother she knew growing up.

Packs of boys tumble about town, thrilled to have escaped their villages for the provincial capital, if only momentarily. Ceylan smiles, remembering her first walk through Ankara, its vastness, buildings reaching toward the sky. The central square is packed. Green headbands wrapped tightly around foreheads, *Ya Hüseyin* scrawled at a severely tilted angle, some already tinged with blood. Ceylan knows the story. Ilyas walked her through it almost every year. He loved Aşura. Not the holiday, exactly. The whole thing is about death, about commemorating the killing of Imam Hüseyin and his followers, Shia who died fighting the Sunni armies of Yazid in the battle of Karbala. What Ilyas loved was the air of urgency, the electricity of assembled bodies converging on Iğdır from all across the province, from villages that seemed more like rumor than reality. Aside from the nights they would meet for nargile, she hardly saw him, catching glimpses of what she thought was him all across town in the flocks of children bending and flexing like giant hands.

They move through the aisles in the Migros, almost every one, her mother appraising each object with the patience of a priest, and Ceylan thinks about Ilyas's trip to Ankara that never happened. She was going to take him to her favorite nargile house, in the old part of the city, nothing more than a covered alleyway with swinging chairs and a pool table and a blinking jukebox and a fridge of Efes. She was even going to bring Martin, the German graduate student she was seeing at the time, who had become more than just a lab partner. When she told him about Ilyas's visit and her plans, he wanted to join, to meet someone else from the east.

When Martin asked how they knew each other, she struggled to explain. They were in her bedroom. It was May, but already Ankara's summer heat had slunk in, shedding its unbearable presence in every corner of the apartment. Martin had just showered and was wearing her old, oversized robe. He wore it sometimes when he stayed over. He stood in the doorway, half in the bedroom, half in the bathroom, using the mirror above the sink as he plucked his eyebrows with her tweezers. He had a careful way of preening himself, seemed more complete to her than the men she'd known in Iğdır, more complete than Ilyas, even.

"A friend," she said, eventually. "From home."

"Ah," he said, his deep voice at odds with his slender frame.

"Looking for work in Bodrum," she said. She knew Martin would know the town. Most Germans who found their way to Turkey knew about its resorts. The Aegean coast was scattered with them. It wouldn't be hard for Ilyas to find work. He just had to get there, connect with someone from Iğdır, spend some days living in a shabby room with pirated electricity, make some money, move into an apartment, and find what he wanted, what he couldn't find back east.

Martin smiled. A secret smile, deep and private. "This Ilyas," he said, and stopped, leaving what was unspoken to sink into the heat of the apartment. His English gave Ceylan the

sensation of driving down a gravel road, rocks pinging the car without rhythm. It kept a certain distance between them, this fear of being struck with something she couldn't anticipate.

She walked over to the doorframe, rested one hand on the wall and the other on his shoulder blade, feeling its slight protrusion through her robe's faded fabric. How could she explain? In Ilyas she could see reflected back her hope to make something of herself outside of Iğdır. The parched soccer pitches, the old men pedaling shabby bicycles, the unfinished apartment blocks—each drenched in a light she'd spent a life avoiding. She'd made a future in the shadows with Ilyas, plotting, dreaming. Their kiss by the soccer goal an audition, an act to spur each other on. Neither wanted to be tied to anything, not yet, so how could it grow into more? They wanted to fade and be forgotten. She looked at Martin, staring back at her from the mirror, and felt it again. That desire to go unnoticed, to disappear. It had taken on a separate life inside her, one she could no longer control.

"An old friend," she said. She smiled and left the room.

Two days later Ceylan heard the news. Seven voicemails, all from her mother, all hysterical. When she called, her mother whispered into the phone, her voice wavering with the fate of the Iğdır Turizm bus. When Ceylan asked her mother where she was, she hissed that she was with Aisha, and in that harsh whisper Ceylan heard the echoes of their lie, understood its permanence. She would be connected with Ilyas for the rest of her life. Any admission would lessen him, turn him into every other man who'd abandoned Iğdır. Aisha would lose the solace of the son who never deserted her, Ceylan's mother the image of the son-in-law on a journey to bring back her only child.

In the years that followed, Ceylan became a living memory for Aisha, as though if she loved Ceylan well enough she could find her son's echoes in her. Ceylan started returning for

Aşura each year to accompany Aisha on the final day's procession to the cemetery, where she wept with her, as well as she could, over Ilyas's gravestone. Later, when Aisha's condition worsened, Ceylan would simply sit with her in her living room. Sometimes they'd go through pictures, and she'd remind Aisha about her son. His mother didn't always recognize him. The last time Ceylan visited she felt illicit, standing outside Aisha's metal door, its blue paint chipping, revealing blooms of rust underneath. When she knocked, she could hear faint movement inside, could picture the shadows readjusting themselves as Aisha moved through the apartment, as she pressed her ear against the door. It had no peephole.

"Who is it?" Ceylan heard her ask, her voice soft, frail, as though it, too, was leaking from the world.

"Aisha," she said. "It's me."

When the door creaked open, Aisha seemed not to believe it, the simple fact of her presence. She reached out and touched Ceylan's smile, pulled taut against her face by some unseen force. She moved her hands over her nose, her cheeks. Ran her fingers through her uncovered hair. It was clear her eyesight was failing, alongside her memory. Ceylan thought about telling her then, explaining that she and Ilyas were never what Aisha imagined. She was about to, just inside that doorway, when Aisha moved away to prepare tea. By the time she returned, Ceylan was at a loss. How could she begin to tell Aisha that she and Ilyas had drifted from each other? That his trip to Ankara was one final visit and nothing more, an ill-advised favor, a misdirection to shield Aisha from the truth?

It was never supposed to work so well.

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Her mother works silently, preparing the aşure. “You should learn,” she says, stirring the ingredients floating in the simmering pot, bringing the heat down.

“I washed the barley,” Ceylan says.

Outside, the afternoon dwindles. Night falls quickly here, pressing down like a flood. Ceylan knows that by the time the aşure is ready, the square will be overflowing, the largest gathering until the procession to the cemetery the next morning. Her mother finishes, listens patiently as Ceylan tries to reason with her, staring with what seems to be resignation into the bowl in her outstretched hands, as though aware that neither she nor Ceylan can provide what Aisha needs, but that they still must try.

“The tent will be packed tonight,” Ceylan says. “I want it to be special.” She hopes she doesn’t sound as unconvincing as she feels. Her last visit worse than any before, a violation of Aisha’s growing forgetfulness and the solace it might provide. She wonders if she can do it again. Her mother knows she’s delaying, and waits. Finally, Ceylan accepts the bowl, wraps a plastic bag over it, and leaves.

In the square, men burn an elaborate sculpture of metal wiring wrapped with paper, the flames licking the night. Ceylan edges around a group of women at the entrance of the tent, their eyes fiery with reflected light. Inside, families cluster around tables toward the front. In the back is the diorama of the desert battle of Karbala, red dye clumped in splotchy circles around figures splayed on their sides, Imam Hüseyin and his followers, dead at the hands of the surrounding Sunnis, their miniature swords daubed with red ink.

Beside the diorama, behind a table with an empty plate and an enormous tank of tea, Aisha sits slumped in a folding chair. “There is tea,” she says, as Ceylan approaches, her eyes fixed in a practiced stare on something in the middle distance. They look grayer, emptier. She

seems worryingly slight in the folds of her black çador. Ceylan searches the lines on her face for some insight into her current state of forgetfulness.

"Aisha," she says. "It's me. Ceylan."

Aisha moves her eyes upward, slowly. Everything she does, she does slowly. She eyes the bowl in Ceylan's outstretched hands, the faded bag covering it. She seems to be waiting for Ceylan to explain herself.

"Aisha," she says. "I brought aşure." She holds it out.

Aisha tilts her head. "There's only tea," she says again.

"A gift," Ceylan says, placing it on the table. "For Aşura."

"Ah," Aisha says, the routine stirring some worn memory. She nods once, an act so deliberate it is hard to affix any meaning beyond the gesture, the movement itself. She sighs.

Ceylan waits for Aisha to ask about Ankara, about when she plans to return to Iğdır. "It isn't much," she says, when Aisha doesn't speak.

Aisha nods again, pulls the bowl from the bag and places it beside the tank. "For the children?" she asks.

Ceylan shrugs, tries to smile.

Aisha thanks her, stares at the pudding as though it will explain her presence.

"It's good," Ceylan says. "Would you like some?" She looks around for a spoon, but there doesn't seem to be much in the tent, which is mostly empty now that the Imam has started preaching. His voice bleeds faintly through the canvas, like a distant radio program.

Aisha smiles a smile that betrays no sign of recognition, and it seems as though the forgetting is complete.

Ceylan turns to leave. This is what she's hoped for, all these years. To return one day to namelessness. No history, no ties. No Ilyas. It's a strange feeling, joining the ranks of the disappeared, knowing her absence will continue to grow, fill her mother and Aisha with the kind of solitude that uses people up here, their only solace the lie she cannot dispel, the false hope that had Ilyas lived he would have stayed, would have kept her here, too. In that lie rests the redemption her life will not provide. It is all she has to offer.

"Wait," Aisha says.

Ceylan stops. Aisha's face flickers in the corner of her vision.

"Did you know him?"

"Who?" Ceylan asks, feigning uncertainty.

"My son."

Ceylan turns. She searches Aisha's stare for something to guide her response. "I'm sorry," she says, finally.

"You did," Aisha says, the wrinkles deepening around her eyes.

Ceylan can sense the implication. She watches Aisha reach for something in her mind, watches her struggle to hold it for as long as she can before it drifts out of reach. Ceylan wonders what it might be—Ceylan and Ilyas together, or Ilyas, or something else entirely.

"Yes," Aisha says, after a long pause. She slowly smoothes the folds of her çador, ceases to see Ceylan in front of her, and whatever it was she briefly imagined.

Ceylan leaves Aisha with the aşure. Outside, she has never seen the square so full. As she forces her way through the crowd, she thinks about turning back to sit with Aisha in the empty tent, but in the crush it already seems impossible. She tells herself Aisha will be okay. That someone, at some point, will need tea, and she won't be alone.

Part II. Hardship General

"And even though we were vaguely aware that dreams often turn into nightmares, we didn't let that bother us."

Roberto Bolaño

A. Overview of Process

It was all anyone could talk about—the news a great invisible updraft, a sudden atmospheric disturbance.

Down from the vast steppe of Mail Analysis, it keened through each eternal hallway, fussing the framed Jumbos depicting POTUS awaiting coffins at Dover, POTUS kissing FLOTUS in a freight elevator, POTUS ordering turkey on wheat, plunging local weather into chaos, mussing lesser, private winds. It groused the Secret Service desk beside the elevator bank, bothered the tight circuitry of each Comment Line cubicle, evacuated headsets left on absent chairs as calls blinked on monitors, unanswered. Flushing the balmy calm from the Gifts Department, it slipped south through Greetings toward Agency Liaison swift as some Simoom, ruffling wigs and hair alike, flustering letters, plucking post-its, tossing any untied thing, this new breath on skin and souls, dark breath, *breathless* breath, now bending back upon itself to blast along the riverrun of Writers & Production, rattling each closed door, each demountable flex wall, pressing every windowless subdepartment in order—Proclamations, Policy Letters, Messages, even Special Messages—a squeeze felt through that tackable fabric, a squeeze that urged panic, that raised sighs, unsettling each mind it touched in that loose group of letter readers young and old, earnest and idle, salaried and unpaid.

Irene had died on the job.

Near noon, the gale fell. Irene was not dead. Irene was not even dying. She'd suffered a stroke beside the office's only functioning copier in Hard Mail, and a mild stroke at that. She had a final phase to move through, more life to be lived—albeit a noticeably more uncertain, more difficult life. But more life was better, everyone agreed, than the sudden end of it all.

Relief and discussion followed.

The few remaining summer interns descended in scattered patterns for lunch, crowding the elevators in hushed clusters. Staffers exchanged developments. One or two were bold enough to whisper, in the relative privacy of their semi-walled workspaces, that they'd foreseen something like this. Time's ravages had not yet visited most of the presidentially-appointed staff. Forty seemed an eternity away, let alone sixty-eight. The volunteer population, on the other hand, was comprised almost entirely of retirees. No one had considered physicals, that a doctor might need to sign off on a volunteer's ability to complete the tasks required of the Office of Presidential Correspondence, that lowly branch of the Office of the Staff Secretary, quarantined, as though terminally infirm itself, a full three blocks from the White House and the Eisenhower Executive Office Building.

The volunteers seemed shaken. They touched each other's shoulders, spoke in whispers. Sophia let the office out early.

No one really knew Irene. Upon examination of her volunteer form, Carl, the head of the Volunteers department, discovered she'd left her emergency contact line unfilled. Later, logic would prevail—Irene's delicate slump onto the copier, and then the floor, would cause an overhaul of the process; the forms, the orientation, who could volunteer, all of it—but then, on the first Friday of the last September of the Obama era, a darkness descended upon the ninth floor of 1800 G Street. Irene's collapse heralded something larger and more menacing. The end was near.

B. Chapter One

Sophia remembered the lawn. The bits of grass and beads of water clinging to her feet as she moved across Magdalen Quad, chasing after a Frisbee propelled by an easy flick of Nick's wrist—each toss floating slowly, landing perfectly, as at ease in the Oxford evening as Nick seemed to be. Earning a Masters in Financial Engineering that seemed with each passing hour of Sophia's visit more like a victory lap than a degree, his entrance into the borderless world of the rich now assured. He told her his plans earlier over vindaloo, the vague name of his future hedge fund slipping through her gin-blurred mind. After graduation he was bound for Manhattan.

Sophia couldn't believe this Nick was the same farm kid from Coal City she'd met at Williams—a fellow flatlander, her closest college friend—who'd listened a little too unceasingly to Elliot Smith their freshman year in that obtuse corner of Massachusetts, articulating his geometry of homesickness through mouthfuls of Easy Mac. It was disorienting to shuffle through his younger selves—to think how *that* Nick was also, somehow, *this* Nick: curry lover, gin connoisseur, abroad and confident and imminently affluent. He had just shown her the rare books section of Magdelan College's library—an intimidating nook of caged oak shelves tucked into an alcove of the grand stone hall. Just across the street was his garden apartment, his unused fixie chained to the rail of the staircase that led to his door, flanked by potted tulips tended by someone he never saw. That was the kind of year it had been for him, the kind of life it would be.

Late May, and still too chilly, really, to remove her sneakers, her socks, but Sophia had done so, had to—that expanse of green demanded the immediacy of bare skin. England was like that. Manicured. Worthy of feeling between your toes. And cool, even in summer. It was her first visit, but Sophia felt, that weekend, almost as at ease as Nick seemed to be. She'd spent the last two days in London, wandering its neighborhoods with the pleasant illusion that she

commanded, if only momentarily, total control of her life, her future, and all its possibilities. She could not see beyond her pleasant, post-collegiate drift. Fresh off a Fulbright teaching Madrileños American Culture, it was nice to bask in someone else's glow, to exist at the edge of the frame. No one yet expected her. No one needed her. She savored her uselessness, those final days abroad, the last hours of a year spent outside America.

Next up, Manhattan. A place with plenty of everything, yet to be lived. Change was coming. The kind she half-longed for, half-feared. Hours in buildings. Personal sacrifice. Her impending career in crisis communications would demand everything, she was sure. She would not be going back to Illinois. Her trips to the interior would henceforth be limited to obligatory holiday visits of increasingly short duration. She would become the sort of person who could not imagine leaving New York. For anything. For anyone. Never, she would say. I would never. That none of this would come to pass—that almost as soon as she arrived in New York she would leave it for northern Iowa and after that, Washington—Sophia had no way of knowing.

And so she flung a Frisbee barefoot on a cool night, aware, as much as it was possible, how she might look from above, the energy around her glistening like ground clutter on radar, emanating from the cool stone residence halls, from the clipped quad, echoing in the toll of chapel bells. She willed herself to look at Nick, to imagine a future linked to the lawn or the stone or the bells, linked to Nick, wishing to tie herself to that feeling she felt, chasing over that grass, pumping her arms, her legs, her lungs, alive in a pause between moments.

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Ten years and two terms later it was returning with increasing force, this memory, that night, like some grave and chronic condition she'd hopelessly sought to ignore. Sophia's growing nostalgia infected her thoughts, her mood, assaulted the organ that did its work within her chest, keeping

time, booming until it wouldn't, until her life would end, like a vacation, or an administration, or an empire.

Sophia had been sitting in her office, weathering a migraine—a sensation she would later consider a corporeal premonition—when Priscilla had burst in with the news that Irene had collapsed, that Irene was possibly dead. She'd sensed in Priscilla's tone the expectation that, as Director of the office, Sophia would know what to do. As though her role extended past directing and managing the shifting coalition of fifty staffers and three hundred volunteers and each seasonal intern class who together facilitated the complex network of organs—Mail Analysis (Hard Mail and Email), Writers & Production, Greetings, Gifts, I.T., Comment Line and Agency Liaison—that comprised the anatomy of Correspondence. As if maintaining the maximum efficiency of this office pushed into holier realms, extended beyond business hours, beyond life itself.

By the time Sophia arrived in Hard Mail, Irene lay peaceful and inert, head resting on someone's rolled fleece. Flesh gray, Irene stared fearfully at the speckled heaven of ceiling tiles. Matt, the posted Secret Service Agent for their office, knelt beside her, speaking soothingly about the imminent arrival of paramedics. Irene blinked slowly and dumbly into his face. A dissonance hummed between her stillness and her eyes, which contained a trapped wildness, an unwillingness to let go. She barely blinked. Sophia felt unsure what to do, what to say, whether she should trust her instincts or even her senses. The scene had a damaged quality, as though the room's light had been bent by some force, or by the very fact of Sophia's presence. She felt she couldn't quite believe what she saw, that her late arrival or even the event itself had somehow altered the space-time fabric of that Friday morning.

“What happened?” Sophia asked, afraid of the doubt in her voice, afraid others could sense it, looking into the crowd of volunteers who’d organized themselves in a respectful semicircle a short distance away. She looked down at Irene, bent toward her. She could hear each breath—a faint, labored wheeze that reminded Sophia of her grandfather’s laugh in his final months, like a sputter of damp kindling, struggling to stay lit.

She had no clue what to do.

“She fell,” said one of the volunteers. “She just fell.”

From behind Sophia came the clattering of wheels and metal. Sophia stood. A pair of paramedics angled through. They moved toward Irene, stopped beside her, and collapsed the stretcher to the ground. Then Irene was gone—placed on the stretcher and wheeled away, out into a waiting ambulance and off to George Washington Hospital.

Over eight years, as Sophia rose from Analyst to Senior Analyst to Department Head to Director, as she’d moved from Mail Analysis to Greetings to Agency Liaison to Writers & Production to Leadership, she had grown to see the ninth floor—her ninth floor—as a mind, shining and bright. Sophia cared for it. Tended it. Grew it. Loved it. This system. Its subsystems. The mission: to respond to each person who contacted POTUS as accurately and meaningfully as possible. Soon Correspondence would pass from Sophia’s care, to be resurrected in the body of the Clinton administration. It was vital to bequeath a healthy operation, so that when Sophia and the rest of the Obama-appointed staff cleared out on January 20th, Clinton’s nominees could start with a fleet of potential policy responses and a list of agency contacts and a reasonably adequate algorithmic sorting machine on the email side. Sophia would not force the next administration to begin anew, like they’d had to. Americans couldn’t afford it.

But Irene was the last thing they needed. Correspondence could not *afford* collapse at this late stage. There was only room for the system and its subsystems and sub-subsystems, all that functioning so layered it might almost be its very own self, a constellation of history and memories and truth and love and ideas and hatred and hopelessness and whatever else flickered in a mind.

Sophia's heart tightened. She was afraid. Afraid beside bodies also afraid. And what was she afraid of? Not death, if that's what this was, or soon would be, but saying something meaningful in its face. Needing to console people she barely knew, when the first day of autumn threatened and the handoff seemed hysterically imminent. Sophia felt unfit. It seemed so much easier on the page. Through the page. When always behind the page was the power of the president.

Sophia elected to let everyone go home. The first 1:00 PM Friday in Correspondence history, snow closings and Christmas Eves excluded. She would update the staff and interns and volunteers as often and as quickly as possible, by email.

After announcing the early dismissal, and after calling the appropriate people in the appropriate offices to inform them appropriately, and after moving through each department of her own office and checking on as many people as she could, and after insisting that everyone really, should actually leave—department heads included—she returned to her office and closed the door. Sophia slipped off her flats. She curled up on the loveseat that rested against the southern wall of her large office. The pressure in her chest constricted into a smaller and smaller knot. She slept.

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Sophia awoke to night. No one had bothered her. Why would they? She had directed them to leave. The office was empty. The gravity in her chest returned, stronger now, as if sleep had recharged it. She understood its source. She'd made a mistake, lost a whole afternoon to her panic. Sophia pressed her hand against her brow, remembered Mackenzie's confused stare when she'd come across her in Greetings, after almost everyone had left. She was a department head and had work to do, Mackenzie had explained, almost indignantly. If people wanted to stay, why not let them? Most of the office missed the event, had heard about it only secondhand, only later. And how she'd responded to Mackenzie with a line about sympathy, or solidarity—something embarrassing she couldn't quite remember. Something false. How she knew, then, that she needed this—the quiet office, the space to think, the time alone to consider the transition. How to prepare for it. How it would feel. Sophia still could not believe it. She would be here day after day after day until suddenly she would not. She would spent her remaining time preparing for it—clearing queues and inboxes, folding every corner of the office into a smooth, clean orb she could hold in her hands in an offer to the next Director. And then a whole new team would arrive, newly ignorant, afloat in chaos. And she would be gone.

But one weak synapse threatened everything. One Irene. What would happen to Spanish language mail now? Who would read it? Who would zero it out?

And who *was* Irene? All Sophia really knew about her was that she understood Spanish, that she'd been volunteering for a decade—two years longer than Sophia's own correspondence career. It bothered Sophia, the blankness on Irene's volunteer form—the truth that there were people in this office she didn't know, that these moments proved how much better Sophia could be at her job. She knew most of the staff, of course, even knew many of the better interns by the end of each class, but the volunteers, somehow, were different. They seemed to occupy a space

beyond her perception. She still remembered fifth grade, when the man who maintained the school buses came to her class to talk about what it was like to fight the Germans in World War Two. He talked about a man he'd knew who got gangrene and lost a foot, and later, his life. I can't stop thinking about how now I might be the only person still carrying around his story, he'd said. And that's sad, because I don't know it that well. I don't know it at all. The man was stooped. His left hand trembled. Sophia remembered staring at the fleshy backs of her hands, aware, for the first time, of something like time—its accumulation, or maybe its loss, which amounted, perhaps, to the same thing. She remembered searching the man's movements for what remained unsaid.

Sophia looked for something like this now in each volunteer, in the shuffle and rhythm of their steps, in the scratch of their voices, in each atmosphere of skin stretched thin over rarefied bone. Sophia remembered a recent letter from a child in Flagstaff cheerily informing POTUS of her favorite fact: that the human body lost about a hundred bones over the course of a lifetime. It seemed like an awful lot to just disappear within. Sophia wondered, then, what else we lost, what things within us vanished as we aged. Was that what we were—diminishing matter? Or something more, something we could locate in permanence, perhaps through language?

Sophia rose and went to the door, opened it, peered down the hallway. Lights off, the few computer pods visible from her doorway sat silent and vacant. Only after she moved back around her desk and called the hospital—heard from them that Irene had stabilized, that she would, in fact, recover, and soon—did Sophia wonder what to do next. Would she have to provide trauma counselors for the volunteers in Hard Mail? Did the EOP have a budget for that? Or could she manage it on her own, as best she could? Would POTUS be told? Was his second and final term

really ending? Would Irene die before it did? And just where should Sophia slot this event in the hierarchy of tasks and worries she carried around with her?

Something seemed to have exploded and collapsed within Sophia, something she couldn't breathe away. Her brain lurched above and around the same tangle of thought. And somewhere beneath that ellipse, her body screamed for freedom, its need to fly through space, to suck in air, to sweat. To get outside this building, this city. Sophia imagined, again, barreling after that Frisbee, wondered in the wake of Irene's fall whether those flashbacks were some sort of sign, a call to action, whether in the afterglow of this recent vision she should visit New York. Visit Nick. Hop on a bus, surprise him at his apartment in Chelsea. She hadn't been back since moving away. Preferred to wait until she returned permanently, something she'd always planned to do. But she wanted to avoid Dupont and U Street, wanted to avoid Shaw and Capitol Hill and Mount Pleasant or anywhere she might normally go. Wherever she went here, now, tonight, she would run into colleagues, would be forced to answer Ineffables and Unactionables. She didn't know Irene, didn't want to reduce her to an anecdote over locally-sourced ingredients and seasonal cocktails.

Sophia's eyes drifted into the glow of her computer screen, to its bottom right corner. It was late. And what if Nick was gone on one of the projects that seemed with increasing frequency to consume his time? They hadn't spoke in months. Evidence of travel trickled across his Instagram—spliced images of regional industry and food. A rig in Texas beside a hunk of brisket. A container ship in Charleston beneath a heap of garlic crabs. Deciding whether one company should transfer figures to another, or close and open a plant in the Sun Belt, the logic of which seemed both as inscrutable and consequential to Sophia as the omen Irene so clearly seemed to represent.

But as quickly as the impulse to flee filled, it emptied. The rush annoyed her, that tidal pull. She shook her head. Visiting Nick would have to wait.

Sophia moved around her desk once more, toward the duffel bag that contained her running gear, stashed beneath her loveseat. Her heart booming, as if it could convince her of life, endlessly, as if it could distinguish itself with each thick beat from whatever dim signal puttered in Irene. Travel tonight seemed impractical, but a run might settle her, convince her heart of its remaining strokes, add a few, even, prolong that hazy future still to be lived, in which she might, conceivably, take a vacation. Maybe she'd visit Irene afterward. Maybe that would put everything into perspective.

Sophia kicked off her flats and unzipped her dress, let it fall to the floor, enjoyed the feel of pumped air meeting her bare skin, the pleasure in that slight tingle, the feeling of exposure that seemed to make the office something else, something personal. She slipped into running clothes, the compression of her shorts soothing as she pulled them on. The monuments at night would have to do, would have to stand in for Manhattan, where she hoped, increasingly, to land, maybe even beside Nick, still haloed after all those years in that lingering memory, distant, scrubbed of imperfection, incandescent in her mind.

C. Chapter Two

Ben sat in the quiet of his office, dark except for his desk lamp, listening to the building breathe. The heating system was powerful and quiet. From eight to seven the daily operations of the building's occupants masked it, but in the evenings after everyone left its subtle groans rose, reclaiming the hallways and vents and conference rooms to restore a kind of awe that slipped beneath the surface of each workday. Ben had learned to love it.

The final three floors between Correspondence and the roof loomed above, abandoned, one after another, by the agencies that once populated them. Veterans Affairs had been the last to relocate, behind schedule, as usual, following the exodus of the State Department and World Bank. What remained was a post-apocalyptic Dilbertscape of broken office furniture. Below all that, holding on to its corner of real estate, forever the subject of rumors about relocation to points more dignified or obscure, lay Correspondence. The building's rent precluded any federal agency from lingering beyond its temporary lease, but Ben liked to believe they left for other reasons. That the place was haunted—whole floors of it. That there had been some kind of accident, some kind of old-time tragedy that couldn't exist in the age of Twitter, or the new grilled cheese sandwich shoppe and wine bar on Pennsylvania Avenue.

At night, as each thump and rumble tumbled through his air vents, Ben heard ghosts. Or, if not ghosts, squatters. Squatters seemed possible. You didn't need a badge to use the elevators. You didn't even need one to get past the security check in the lobby. All you needed to move through the metal detector and into the elevator bank was a driver's license. There was a silliness to the security that spoke, in many ways, to how Ben had come to feel about Correspondence. Yes, they were working long hours in business professional attire, ready, like all White House staffers must be, to enter the Oval Office on a moment's notice. Yes, they had Salesforce

dashboards and email reports for Daily Incoming and Agency Casework and Accountables and Turndowns and MIs and10LADs and 46As and 15Es and STORYSHAREs and SAMPLEs and RED DOTs—a forever expanding system of classification for the flow of mail over the past eight years—but what were all those procedures and systems and policies for? What were they doing, creating, improving? Correspondence was a mailroom. America's mailroom. A dusty crossroads for letters. A waiting place. A graveyard. Ghosts afloat on neighboring floors. No action, no movement, no change bloomed in this walled-off weedpatch. The office Ben had worked for this entire presidency had constructed a tortuous maze for a thing that seemed, increasingly, to have no place in the world. He no longer believed that anyone could be helped by words on a page or a screen—that such an exchange had any power, could mean anything tangible for writer or reader. That any part of the letter writing process could combat the malaise that hung heavy in the twists and loops of the letters in letters from everywhere, as if language could cut through the dysfunction that seemed to exist and prevail and entrench itself in Washington like whatever afterhours apparitions now moaned in the empty spaces around him, deep in the marrow of things.

Yet the mail remained. It lingered, limp and irradiated, in boxes and bins blocks from power.

Ben fantasized running down the hallways, bellowing, tie tied around his forehead; dreamed of walking down to the Southwest Freeway's westbound ramp and hitching a ride into the great unknown that existed, presumably, beyond Arlington. The Northwestern Building felt like a purgatory as drab as its name, with its half-filled floors and pointless lobby security check and always, always, that teasing proximity to something greater, something enormously powerful and just out of reach. The hope Ben had carried since his first workday increasingly delusional—

that he'd eventually land in the East or West Wings, or even the Eisenhower Executive Office Building—it didn't matter where. OPE, OSA, Speechwriting, OVP, OMB, the Social Office, the Visitors Office, OFL, OSTP, even M & A. Anything to escape. Here he languished—an eternity away from whatever he'd once imagined he'd come to Washington to do.

And why? People had been jumping ship for years. Every time he turned on CNN a former face of the administration spoke onscreen about some fresh venture, some newer hope or change—for Amazon, for Uber, for Hillary. Former colleagues swam through the Bay Area and its technological arrondissements like the postwar expats of Paris. There were spots to land, and they'd landed, but what about all the spots they'd vacated? Who filled those? When would Ben's call come? Did a call come? Or was it some other process? Ben networked, had coffees, even worked out at the White House Gym some evenings, that battered space jammed into a slice of the New Executive Office Building's second floor, furtively scanning the room from his elliptical, searching for anyone who looked influential and approachable. He felt invisible. Did they even know he was still here, under all that mail?

Yet despite the accumulation of such dread, Ben tried to focus on the positive. A part of him enjoyed seniority. He took a certain pride in lingering in his office each evening, liked to imagine how he looked as he sat there, alone, shoes off, feet on his desk, the gray wool of his suit pants scratchy against his legs, tie loosened. To the untrained eye it might almost appear as though he were working on something momentous—POTUS's final line-edits on the SOTU, perhaps, or even his farewell address. For the most part, Ben liked his office, and for the most part, he figured, it was healthy to like your office. To accept it. He tried not to focus on the unease spreading through him, enflamed by Irene's collapse that afternoon, tried instead to think about his position as one of the ancien garde on the ninth floor of 1800 G Street. On good days

he managed, but days like today he felt his humble role, a scribbled number on the margins, faint graphite in the upper corner of a letter that he'd read and assigned a policy response, scanned and archived for posterity. He already imagined boring his grandchildren at POTUS's future library. *See that number seven in the left corner? That's my mark.* Still, Ben nourished a mild happiness, aware of the irony in that small indulgence—that the routines he'd come to cherish, that the very office he'd grown to appreciate marked him a failure. A non-riser.

He focused on other things.

Ben remembered a world before a twelve-deep Writers & Production team churned out Custom Responses, a world before the lowest backlog in the history of the office. That summer saw a mere six-week turnaround between receipt and response—a feat the newer staff failed to appreciate, a goddamn feat of the heavens. Ben was proud of how far the place had come, proud to have witnessed its growth. He found himself spending stretches of his days reminiscing about the first term, the first disorganized months, that long drive from Iowa, the sleepless night he'd spent on his friend Henry's couch on the eve of his first day, anticipating the imminent commute, his first. He'd been awed by the emptiness of the space. The ninth floor yawned before them, threatened to swallow them whole. Thinly carpeted floors, blast curtains on the windows, boxes and boxes of mail. They sat and read and waited for the installation of computers and desks and cubicles.

They were already behind.

Ben saw the floor fill, watched the natural light disappear behind the rising towers of cardboard containers that held all sizes of envelopes knifed open and certified safe by the Secret Service offsite facility, flowing into their space unabated, forever outpacing all human attempts to read and respond, boxes of mail covering the walls, the windows. He'd helped install the

computers for Email, helped connect the phones for Comment Line. Eventually, Ben moved from Mail Analysis to Writers & Production. Eventually he led it. Expanded it. He'd convinced Sophia—who had risen to Director by then—that more writers were necessary. Ben shaped that department slowly and delicately, cultivating nuance wherever he could, line by line in the responses they returned, to make each feel more authentic than the last, as though written by POTUS himself, that impossible goal. He saw temporary walls constructed and taken away, trained countless interns and staffers and even volunteers. Soon it would end. So he stayed late, wondering distractedly what might be next, cranking Tom Waits.

At night no one judged your Pandora stations.

Ben's accomplishments seemed the refuse of a lifetime of stagnation. He'd worked his way up from Analyst to Senior Analyst to Department Head, first of Mail Analysis, then Writers & Production. Now he helmed Agency Liaison, the department of Correspondence that coordinated with federal agencies to aid constituents who requested help with casework. Ben had his own office—a corner office with morning sunlight—and one of the best swivel chairs, with an elegantly curved backrest and adjustments for upper back force, back stops, seat height, and lower back firmness. His analyst number, seven, was lower than anyone's except Sophia, who, in a cruel twist of fate, spoke to him these days only as a colleague.

Ben sighed. He rubbed his hands over the smooth pleather arms of his chair. Yes, he liked his office. Liked it most now, alone, darkness outside, clicking through reports, through backlogs, through multicolored bar graphs of agency response times. He'd spent the last year of his office walkabout here. He'd switched abruptly eleven months ago when the spot opened up, or rather, *was* switched by Sophia, who increasingly had to edit the veiled grievances and doubts Ben had begun to include in the overwritten drafts of the policy letters he composed as the head

of Writers & Production. Whole sections that needed to be cut, that had no place in the careful imitation prose of POTUS. Ben couldn't stand it— the spiraling lyricism for something that wasn't quite present, the soaring appreciation for a nation that was, at best, coming soon. The cagey language, the hedging of words. *People like you…stories like yours…*Answering, truly answering, required a willingness to subvert the rules, a slip toward specificity in the details and words of each response so that they acknowledged, unequivocally, each writer's existence, each fact and sorrow and hope that had been put to paper. Each voice.

He knew that. Knew too that Correspondence didn't do that, couldn't do that. That modern politics wouldn't allow for it. That the scale of the task prevented it. This office and its mission was just another civic myth—like the harmony between settlers and indigenous Americans at the first thanksgiving, or the notion that elected representatives worked for the public and not donors. It became too much. Ben needed something else, something certain, something like closure, and so he agreed when Sophia mercifully moved him, claiming his eye and innovation were needed to run Agency Liaison when the position opened up. That their final year needed to be their best. Her flattery had helped thaw his Weltschmerz, but Ben couldn't help but see through Sophia's faith in him, earnest or not, to the smoldering core of things as *he* saw them. He was being repurposed.

Still, the data from the new role helped fulfill his need. The reports spoke to him, validated his time, his service to POTUS, his service to the American people. This data a language he could mostly believe in. The office had recently switched constituent management systems yet again, and the slick coloring and nuanced graphics of the latest software sustained, like never before, his psyche, which seemed, more than ever, in daily need of saving.

He clicked through the last of the casework he'd been sending to the VA, dismayed by their response times. He slid his legs off his desk and stood. The thought of a squat brown bottle of creamy stout appealed to him—if only they could bring beer into this building. Another charm of purgatory. You could cart booze into the West Wing by the case, and the East Wing, and the EEOB—you could even bring it into the NEOB if you were subtle about it. But not at 1800 G Street. He didn't need No-Meeting-Wednesdays of a start up, or a pinball gallery or lofted ceilings or bespoke copper piping lights or celebrity speaker series or 'massage credits' or kombucha on tap. He didn't want to wear jeans to work. He just wanted a beer at his desk while working into the night.

The carpet pulled at the fibers in his dress socks as he moved through the office. He found himself wandering toward the communal kitchenette near I.T., as though it would yield deliverance or alcohol. Each empty intern pod he passed a cool blue cave, gently illuminated by fifteen glowing screens staring at no one, hard drives humming as they updated. He listened for a human sound. Nothing. He looked at his watch. Secret Service had checked out by now, the desk by the elevator would be unoccupied. Sophia had dismissed the office hours ago. He thought he was alone.

When the door to Sophia's office behind him clicked open he almost jumped. He turned, jammed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. A smile stretched across his face.

Sophia looked just as startled. She smiled tightly, whispered hello. Earbuds in, sleek in her running gear, her clipped response seemed like nothing more than that of a surprised superior running unexpectedly into someone at the end of her day, drained of the practiced professional courtesy such interactions required. Sophia was intimidating, sensible, and wary of disorder. A

consummate professional who wasted little time chatting, who moved through each department with the purpose of a devotee, lacking humor, it seemed, until one of her loud, elongated and uncontrollable bursts of laughter would explode through her cracked door, and the office would collectively tense and wonder what had released such a display of emotion from such a Director. By this time of night on a Friday though, Ben knew, Sophia had already transitioned into earnestly hoping not to see another soul from the office until the following week, when she'd do it all again, slip back into running the place. He'd fallen for that, back in Iowa—that harsh delineation and the powerful desire it provoked in him to transcend it, to live on either side of her borders, like some kind of dual citizen.

In the low light of the kitchenette her skin looked soft and warm. Had Ben not just been pondering ghosts, or the accumulated failures of his past eight years, the better angels of his nature might have prevailed. But, in an office almost touched by death that very morning, Ben didn't think to question his sudden, certain suspicion: that Sophia was on her way somewhere else, that she knew he remained and had developed this plan to slip under his radar, stealthily, silently, cloaked in running clothes on her way to meet someone from Bumble or Ok Cupid or maybe just the Hill at one of those overpriced bars by Logan Circle, one with a retro neon sign in the window and a plethora of small plates, tucked into the benevolent mass of new properties on 9th across from the Whole Foods.

As Ben turned back toward his office for his shoes, he heard a distant ding, Sophia's light tread as she moved into an open elevator, and the slide of the closing doors. In that moment, he decided to follow. He turned, forgoing his shoes, pressed the down button frantically for another car. If he lost her he'd have to work up the nerve to do something just as reckless in the future, when he might not be as capable.

Ben reached the empty, darkened lobby. He hustled out onto G Street, saw Sophia's dark form cutting east toward 17th, still walking. He started toward her, keeping a block back, tacking to conceal himself behind the few stragglers still out on that stretch of sidewalk, a clump of tourists, some workers headed home. The downtown emptied quickly most nights—most coffee shops and restaurants shuttered before dinnertime, all closed but for the bars that made a living off of proximity to the Mall and its intramural activities, hosting their clientele of grotesque—flip cup yuppies and kickball squads. Ben avoided it. Now though, he charged through, propelled by anxiety. Where was Sophia headed? Who had taken his place?

Sophia passed the gutted carcass of Swings Coffee, cut south down 17th. When she reached the Hall Of The Daughters Of The American Revolution she started skipping, thrusting her knees skyward, swinging her arms as though she were tossing an invisible cup into the air, over and over. Ben had never seen her do this before. A thrill ran through him as he watched her move purposely and fluidly under the mistaken notion she was doing so unobserved. He paused, wondering what else he'd missed, worried that she might not think about him anymore, that she might not think of him at all. That *she* would never follow *him*. It stung. He regretted declining her invitations to join her jogs along the Tidal Basin, that he had never hopped alongside her, swinging his arms just as foolishly.

At Constitution and 17th she paused, bounced a few times side to side on her feet like a boxer, and took off across the avenue as the seconds to cross diminished. Ben lingered at the edge of crosswalk without a reason to follow. His hunch was misguided. The walk sign became a flashing hand, the seconds now below ten. He looked down at his feet, wiggled his toes. He'd stepped in something oily. He had three seconds if he wanted to cross, otherwise he'd lose her. He cut across the intersection, horns blaring as soon as the light turned green.

He picked her up on the other side, a darker and more distant shape, curving around a path by one of the ponds that marked the boundary between the avenue and the monuments, heading, it seemed, for the Lincoln Memorial. So. She was one of *those* runners. The kind that needed to finish at the foot of some large, marble thing. He'd always suspected that about her. Every Director seemed to have that need. Every SAP and DAP counseling POTUS. Every Blue Badge holder. To be better, faster, to require less, to drink coffee black and spend whole days at dual monitors clicking and typing through crises. He darted through the sparse grove of trees between the reflecting pool and her path, no longer following her to catch her in the act of dating someone new, no longer following her for any reason at all.

III. Works Cited

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