ALONE THEY ARE LOST. TOGETHER THEY ARE FOUND.

Around the time that Freya loses her voice while recording her debut album, Harun is making plans to run away from everyone he has ever loved, and Nathaniel is arriving in New York City with a backpack, a desperate plan, and nothing left to lose. When a fateful accident draws these three strangers together, their secrets start to unravel as they begin to understand that the way out of their own loss might just lie in helping the others out of theirs.

An emotionally cathartic story of losing love, finding love, and discovering the person you are meant to be, *I Have Lost My Way* is bestselling author Gayle Forman at her finest.

ALSO BY GAYLE FORMAN

Sisters in Sanity

If I Stay

Where She Went

Just One Day

Just One Year

Just One Night (novella)

I Was Here

Leave Me

Pour Your Heart Out

I HAVE LOST MY WAY

By

GAYLE FORMAN

VIKING

VIKING
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014

First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE.

ISBN 9780425290774

Printed in U.S.A.
Set in Dante
Book design by Nancy Brennan

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Ken Wright, Anna Jarzab, and Michael Bourret

Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper, lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.

–Jalaluddin Rumi

———o———

Not all who wander are lost.

–J. R. R. Tolkien

I HAVE LOST MY WAY

1

I HAVE LOST MY WAY

I have lost my way.

Freya stares at the words she just typed into her phone.

I have lost my way. Where did *that* come from?

"Excuse me, miss," the car service driver repeats. "I think I have lost my way." And Freya startles back to reality. She's in the backseat of a town car on her way to her seventh—or is it eighth?—doctor's appointment in the past two weeks, and the driver has gotten turned around outside the tunnel.

She toggles over to her calendar. "Park and Seventieth," she tells the driver. "Turn right on Third, then left on Seventy-First."

She returns her attention to the screen. *I have lost my way.* Eighteen characters. But the words have the undeniable ring of truth to them, the way middle C does. The way few of her posts these days do. Earlier this morning, someone from Hayden's office put up a photo of her gripping a microphone, grinning. *#BornToSing*, the caption read. *#ThankfulThursday.* Really it should read *#TBT* because the image is

not only weeks old, it's of a person who no longer exists.

I have lost my way.

What would happen if she posted that? What would they say if they knew?

It's only when her phone makes the whooshing noise that Freya realizes she did post it. The responses start to flow in, but before she has a chance to read them, there's a text from her mother: 720 Park Ave, and a dropped pin. Because of course her mother is monitoring the feed as vigilantly as Freya. And of course her mother has misunderstood. Anyway, Freya hasn't lost her way. She's lost her voice.

She deletes the post, hoping it was fast enough that no one screen-shot it or shared it, but she knows nothing on the internet ever goes away. Unlike in real life.

Her mother is waiting for her when the car arrives, pacing, holding the test results from the last doctor, which she had to hightail it into the city to collect. "Good, good, you're here," she says, opening the door before the driver has pulled to a complete stop and yanking Freya to the sidewalk before she has a chance to give him the ten-dollar tip she's holding. "I already filled out the paperwork." She says this like she did it to save time, but she fills out the paperwork at all of Freya's doctor's appointments.

They're ushered straight past reception into the examination room. It's the kind of service a $1,500 consult, no insurance taken (thanks, Hayden) buys you.

"What seems to be the problem?" the doctor asks as he

washes his hands. He does not look at Freya. He probably has no idea who she is. He looks old, like a grandfather, though reportedly he has treated the sort of one-named wonder that as of a few weeks ago everyone thought Freya was on her way to becoming.

She wishes she'd read some of the responses before deleting that tweet. Maybe someone would've told her what to do. Maybe someone would've told her it didn't matter if she could sing. They'd still love her.

But she knows that's bullshit. Love is conditional. Everything is.

"She's lost her voice," her mother says. "Temporarily." She goes through the tediously familiar chronology—"third week in the studio" and "all going flawlessly" and *blah blah blah blah*—and all the while the phrase *I have lost my way* goes through Freya's head, like a song on repeat, the way she and Sabrina used to loop the same track over and over again until they'd dissected it, uncovered all its secrets and made them their own. It drove their mother crazy, until she discovered the utility of it.

The doctor palpates her neck, peers into her throat, scopes her sinuses. Freya wonders how he would respond if she hocked a loogie. If he would actually look at her like a person instead of a piece of machinery that has malfunctioned. If he would *hear* her, singing voice or not.

"Can you sing a high C for me?" the doctor asks.

Freya sings a high C.

"She can hit the individual notes," her mother explains. "And her pitch is perfect. Hayden says he's never heard pitch like that before."

"Is that a fact?" the doctor says, feeling the cords in her neck. "Let's hear a song. Something simple for me, like 'Happy Birthday.'"

"Happy Birthday." Who can't sing "Happy Birthday"? A child can sing "Happy Birthday." A person who can't sing at all can sing "Happy Birthday." To show her opinion of such a request, she starts to sing, but in a heavy French accent.

"Apee birsday to you . . ." she trills. Her mother frowns, and Freya doubles down on the accent. *"Apee birsday to vous . . ."*

But her voice is smarter than she thinks. It will not be outsmarted by antics or a bad fake accent. And as soon as the song makes the baby leap in octave, from G4 to G5, she gets tripped up in it. The panic takes over. The breath turns to lead.

"Appee birsday, dear . . ." And on the *dear* it happens. The air shuts off. The song is strangled mid-breath. A stillborn melody.

"Happy birthday to me," she finishes in sarcastically atonally American deadpan, making a slicing gesture across her throat in case the message wasn't clear enough.

"Is it paralysis? We heard something like that happened with"—her mother lowers her voice to a hushed whisper—*"Adele."*

Freya can hear the hope in her mother's voice. Not because she wants vocal paralysis but because she wants to link

Freya to Adele. A few years back, she read that book *The Path*, and she bought into it 200 percent. *Dream it, be it* is her motto.

"I'm going to send you for some tests," the doctor says, retreating into the already-familiar jargon. "A CAT scan, a biopsy, an LEMG, maybe an X-ray." He pulls out a card, slides it over, and gives Freya a look that does not seem all that Hippocratic. "And you might consider talking to someone."

"We did, but the lobotomy didn't take."

"Freya!" her mother scolds. To the doctor, "We're already seeing a therapist."

We. Like they're seeing him together. Like they're both taking the little pills that are supposed to quell the anxiety that is supposedly stifling Freya's voice.

"This *just* happened. Literally overnight. If this were"—and here her mother's voice drops to a whisper—"*psychological*, it wouldn't happen in the blink of an eye like that, would it?"

The doctor makes noncommittal noises. "Let's schedule a follow-up in two weeks."

Two weeks is too late. Hayden has made that clear. He called in favors to arrange a visit to the famous doctor, treater of one-named wonders like Adele and Lorde and Beyoncé. He paid the $1,500 consultation fee because this guy, Hayden swore, is a miracle worker—implying that what Freya needs is not overpriced medical care but an actual miracle.

Outside, Hayden's car and driver are waiting, even though he didn't send the driver to take Freya here. The driver opens the door and bows slightly. "Mr. Booth has requested I bring you to the offices."

Freya has spent much of the past two years in Hayden's offices, but the request makes her feel queasy. Her mother, who still, after all this time, acts like Hayden is the emperor and she the peasant, looks freaked out. She frantically scrolls through her texts. "He probably just wants to know how it went."

Hayden Booth doesn't summon without reason, and the reason would not be to gather information. Freya's sure he received a call from the doctor the minute the door shut behind them. Or, who knows, maybe he had a secret camera filming the entire exam.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If she doesn't go to Hayden's office, he can't fire her. And if he can't fire her, her career isn't over. And if her career isn't over, people will still love her.

Right?

"I'm tired," she tells her mother, with a weary wave. "You go."

"He asked for us both." She looks to the driver. "Did he ask for us both?"

The driver has no clue. Why would he?

"I'm exhausted from all the stupid doctors' appointments," Freya says, going into what her mother calls diva mode. Diva mode befuddles her mother because on the one hand, *dream it, be it*, but on the other hand, it's fucking annoying.

When her mother gets upset, she purses her lips in a way that makes her look exactly like Sabrina, or Sabrina exactly like her. "It's like the genes chose sides," their old babysit-

ter used to joke. Meaning Freya took after their father—the reddish skin, the high forehead, the telltale Ethiopian eyes—whereas Sabrina looked more like their mother, the hair curly, not kinky, the skin light enough to pass, if not for white, then Puerto Rican.

But then her mother reconsiders, and the prune mouth is gone. "You know what? Maybe that's smarter. I'll talk to him. Remind him that you're only nineteen. That you've come so far. That we have so much momentum. Making them wait will only make them hungrier. We just need a bit more time." She's back on her phone. "I'm ordering you an Uber."

"Mom. I'm quite capable of getting myself back home."

Her mother continues tapping on the phone. Freya's not meant to take the subway alone anymore. Her mother has a tracker installed on Freya's phone. She exercises caution even though, like Freya's diva attitude, this too is premature. Freya is not famous. She is somewhere between buzz and celebrity on Hayden's scale. If she goes dancing at clubs, or hits the kind of bar or café frequented by up-and-coming Actor/Model/Singers, she's recognized; if she does an event at a shopping mall (which she no longer does; not on brand, the publicists say), she's mobbed. But on the subway, amid regular people, she is exactly nobody. But for her mother, every one of her actions is aspirational.

"I'm just gonna walk a bit," Freya tells her mother. "Maybe go through the park, clear my head, see what's on sale at Barneys."

She knows her mother will not refuse the healing power

of Barneys. Though Freya still feels mildly uncomfortable in places like that. She's often followed, and she is never sure if it's because she's half-famous or half-black.

"Go find something pretty," her mother says. "Take your mind off things."

"What else is on the schedule?" Freya asks, out of habit, because there's always something and her mother has it memorized. Her mother's awkward pause is painful. Because the answer is *nothing*. Nothing is scheduled because this time was allotted to being in the studio. Right now, she's meant to be finishing up recording. Next week, Hayden is going to some private island for a week, and then he's back in the studio with Lulia, the gap-toothed singer he discovered busking in the Berlin Metro whom Hayden made so famous that her visage smirks from a billboard in Times Square.

"That could be you," Hayden once told her.

Not anymore.

"Nothing," her mother says.

"So I'll see you back at the apartment."

"Well, it's Thursday."

Thursday nights her mother and Sabrina have a standing dinner date. It usually goes unmentioned. Freya is never invited.

Obviously.

"I can put it off if you need me," her mother says.

The bitterness is awful. She can taste it. She wonders if it'll melt the enamel off her (recently whitened) teeth.

It's also embarrassing. What should she have to be bitter about where her sister is concerned? Sabrina, who, as her mother says, has *sacrificed so much*. She whispers the last part the same way she whispers *breather* when discussing what's going on with Freya. "You're just taking a *breather*."

(*Breather* is code for *self-immolation*.)

"You'd better go," Freya tells her mother before the bitterness melts away her insides, leaving only a bag of empty skin. "Hayden's waiting."

Her mother glances at the SUV, the driver. "I'll call you as soon as I get news." She climbs into the car. "Clear your head. Take a day for yourself. Don't think about any of this. You never know—it might be just what the doctor ordered. I bet if you can go the rest of the day without thinking about this, you'll feel better. Go shopping. Go home and binge *Scandal*."

Yes, that's exactly what Freya needs. And perhaps a glass of warm milk. And a second lobotomy.

She waits for her mother to drive off before she starts walking, not south toward Barneys but west toward the park. She pulls out her phone and looks at her Instagram feed. There's another shot of her, standing outside the studio on Second Ave., under a just-blooming cherry tree. The caption reads, *#Music #Flowers #Life #BeautifulThings*, and the comments are full of nice things that should make her feel better. *Nothing more Btiful than U.* And *NEED NEW VID!* And *FollowbackPLZ!!!!*

A car honks, and someone yanks her back onto the curb,

sneering, "Pay attention." Freya doesn't say thank you, instead walks into the park, where there's no traffic and she can read the comments in peace.

She toggles over to her YouTube channel. Per Hayden's instructions, she has not posted anything in months. He wanted the fans to be "famished" for new material so that when the album dropped, and new videos, they'd be devoured. Freya was worried they'd forget her, but Hayden said there were other ways to stay in the public eye and employed a publicist whose job it was to place a series of anonymous scoops about her.

Freya climbs up a hill, onto a small bridge. A group of cyclists whizzes past her, blasting through the air with their shrill whistles, as if they own the park. She opens Facebook. She types *Sabrina Kebede*. Though she only allows herself this indulgence once a month, Freya knows there won't be anything there. Her sister's Facebook page has been all but dormant for the past two years, maybe two or three posts, almost always tags.

And yet, there it is, a fresh post, a few weeks old. A picture posted by someone named Alex Takashida of a man, presumably Alex Takashida, holding up a delicate hand with a small sapphire ring. The caption underneath reads: *She said yes!*

Even with the face cut off, Freya recognizes that hand.

She said yes! It takes Freya a minute to understand what this means. Her sister is engaged. To Alex Takashida. Someone Freya has never heard of, much less met.

Freya clicks on Alex's timeline and discovers that Alex Takashida makes his posts public, and Sabrina, though not tagged, is in nearly all of them. There's Sabrina clinking glasses with Alex at a restaurant. There's Sabrina and Alex on a beach. There's Sabrina beaming between Alex and their mother. There's Sabrina looking not like someone who *sacrificed so much* but like someone happy.

It makes Freya want to puke. To console herself, she opens the app that tracks what her mother now calls her engagements. She doesn't even need to see the comments anymore to feel better. She just needs to know that they're there. That the likes and follows are growing. The uptick of numbers is reassuring. The occasional downtick makes her feel like her stomach's falling out.

Today, the numbers are going up. Those posts of her in the studio always do well. People are excited about her album. She wonders what will happen when the months go by and there is no album.

Only she knows. At the first meeting with Hayden, he'd told her exactly what would happen.

She opens the comments from this morning's ersatz post. *Love the flowers. Can't wait 4 the album.*❤❤🌠🎤🎶🎧 She refreshes the page to see if anything else has come in but nothing has, and though she knows it'll only make her feel worse, she toggles back to the picture of Sabrina's hand. The cyclists whip by, blowing their awful whistles at her, shouting at her to watch out, but Freya can't take her eyes off her sister

and all that happiness. Can't escape the sickening sensation that she's done it all wrong.

I have lost my way, she thinks once more and understands how true this is. Another cyclist whistles by and Freya, still staring at the image of sister's sapphire ring, jumps back and stumbles and suddenly she is not just lost but falling, falling off the bridge onto some poor soul below.

— — —

Around the time Freya is speaking to yet another doctor who cannot help her, Harun is trying to pray.

As the men stream into the mosque, taking their place on the rugs around Harun and his father, he tries to make his intention known to God. But for the life of him, he can't. He doesn't know what his intentions are anymore.

He will make for him a way out, his cousin had texted. But what is Harun's way out?

I have lost my way, Harun thinks as the prayer begins.

"Allah Akbar," he hears his father chant beside him.

And again, the thought: *I have lost my way*. Harun tries to focus. But he can't. He can think of nothing but James.

Forgive me, Harun had texted this morning.

No response.

Not even a *Get the fuck out my life*, which was the last thing James had said to him.

There wouldn't be a response. James never said things he didn't mean.

Unlike Harun.

When the *zuhr* concludes, Harun and his father go outside to collect their shoes and exchange pleasantries with the other men. All around, there is talk of Hassan Bahara, who died last week while fueling his car at the gas station.

"It was his heart," Nasir Janjua tells Abu.

Clucking of tongues ensues. Confessions of high cholesterol levels. Wifely naggings to get more exercise.

"No, no," Nasir Janjua says. "It was a heart defect, silent until now."

A defect of the heart. Harun knows a thing or two about those. But unlike Hassan Bahara, his defect isn't silent. He's known about it for years.

Abu clasps an arm on Harun's shoulder. "Everything okay?"

I have lost my way. He imagines telling Abu this.

But that would only break his father's heart. It was always a choice of whose to break. As for his own, a foregone conclusion. Broken either way. It's what happens with defective hearts.

"Yeah, Abu, I'm fine," he says.

"You sure?" he asks. "You don't often come to mosque." There's no reproach in his voice. His older brother Saif started middle school on the day 9/11 happened, and after that he began calling himself Steve and refusing to attend mosque. By the time Harun stopped going, the battle had already been lost. Or won. Depending on how you looked at it.

"I figured since I'm going . . ." he trails off. "Amir goes every day."

"Yes, your cousin is very devout." Abu ruffles his hair.

"You are a good boy. You have made Ammi very happy."

"And you?"

"Always."

It is for the *always* he's doing this. To continue the always. To never lose the always.

They reach the intersection of Sip and Westside. Harun turns left, in the opposite direction from his house and Abu's store.

"I thought no school today," Abu says, assuming that is where Harun is going.

There's never school on Thursdays. Thursdays are the invisible day added to the weekly schedule last year. Thursdays are their day to be together in Manhattan, where they can slip through the streets like ghosts.

In winter, they meet at Chelsea Market, waltzing through the restaurants they can't afford to eat at while James, who wants to be a chef one day, ogles the fresh pasta, the buttery croissants, the sausages drying from the rafters, and describes all the meals he will cook for them one day. When the weather is warm, they meet under a little arched bridge in Central Park.

They have not missed a single Thursday. Not when a blizzard shut down the above-ground trains, not when James was sick with bronchitis and all Harun wanted to do was get him somewhere warm and dry but for the life of him could not imagine where such a place might be. They'd wound up in a Panera, drinking tea, watching YouTube videos, pretending it was their apartment.

"I'm just going to tie up some loose ends," he tells Abu.

"Don't be late for dinner," Abu says. "Your mother has taken the last two days off work to cook.. Your brother is coming. With his wife." His father tries not to frown at the mention of Saif's wife but is not entirely successful.

"I won't be late," Harun says, even though before he left the house, he took his passport and the five hundred dollars cash meant for tomorrow's trip and tucked them into his pocket. It was a rash, last-minute thing to do, but it opened up the possibility of not getting on that plane, of running away for good, in which case he would be very late for dinner.

Coward.

I have lost my way.

He hugs his father goodbye, which isn't something he often does, and he worries that it'll arouse suspicion but it doesn't because Abu says only: "Be home in time. You know how your mother gets."

As soon as Abu is safely out of sight, he texts: Going to our place @ park. Meet me there.

At Journal Square, he enters the Path station. The smell of the tunnels—musty, moldy, redolent of old garages—makes him ache for James.

Everything does.

He takes the train to the terminus at Thirty-Third Street and walks out past the neon signs of the chain clothing stores. In the early days, before they'd learned the secret public spaces in the city, they'd sometimes stopped in one of these shops, trying on all manner of sweaters and trousers neither had any

intention of buying because they could sneak into the same dressing room and, behind those slatted doors, the discarded sweaters at their feet like a camouflage, steal a kiss. Every so often they'd buy something, like the socks Harun is wearing today. They called it rent.

The phone rings in his hand and Harun jumps, hope rushing in like a rising tide, but it's not James.

"I was thinking it might be nice to buy some of that hand cream for Khala," Ammi says, even though there's already a suitcase of gifts for Khala and for Khalu, the cousins, and of course for the prospective families he'd be meeting. "Are you passing by the Hudson?"

Hudson is a mall not far from their house. "Sure," he tells her, because what is one more lie on the steaming pile of them?

"And some ginger. I want to make you some tea for the plane."

"They won't let me bring liquids through security."

"Well, until security," Ammi says. "To keep you in good health."

His throat closes. He is a coward and a liar and a bad son. He hangs up, and a minute later his phone buzzes with a text and he pulls it out, once again full of hope, but it is Amir.

I will see you soon, Inshallah.

Inshallah, he texts back.

He walks into the park, guided by autopilot and hope, to their spot at the bridge. When he sees someone waiting on top, under the cherry tree that, on that last day, they kissed

under, his hope surges again. It could be him, he tells himself, even though the skin is too light and the frame is too small and also it is a woman. If only James were a woman. Ha.

I'm here, he texts.

There is no answer, but that doesn't stop him from seeing James everywhere. There he is, riding a bike in spandex, though James would be horrified by anyone even picturing him in such a ridiculous getup. There he is pushing a baby in a jogging stroller, though James hates exercise. There he is coming toward him, through the tunnel under the bridge.

None of these people are James, and for that, Harun hates them. He hates everything and everyone in this world. If Allah made the world, why did he make Harun wrong? If Allah is love, then why isn't James the one walking through the tunnel instead of some white boy?

This is what he's thinking at the exact moment the girl who is not James falls off the side of the bridge, landing with a loud thud on the boy who is also not James.

— — —

Around the time Freya is speaking to yet another doctor who cannot help her, and Harun is trying to pray, Nathaniel is emerging onto a crowded Manhattan street with no idea of where he is.

"I have lost my way," he says as people stream by him. When no one responds, he isn't that surprised. He's been invisible for a while.

He's followed the directions exactly as the sign at the air-

port told him to. Walked to the edge of the terminal, climbed on the bus bound for Manhattan. But he must've fallen asleep, because he awoke to the hiss of the bus's pneumatic door and everyone else had filed out.

He tries to focus, but he's disoriented and bleary. The name of the flight he was on, a red-eye, turned out to be literal.

The night before, as the plane sped past the quilt of a country Nathaniel never got to know, around him people snored away wearing sleep masks and head pillows, taking pills to trick themselves into thinking they were home in bed. But he hadn't slept in the past two weeks, so there seemed little chance he was going to sleep on the plane. After take-off, the passenger in front of him tilted his seat back, sending Nathaniel's knees to his chest. He'd stayed up half the night reading his father's copy of The Lord of the Rings, and when he could stand that no more, the guidebook he'd stolen from the library. In the dim cabin light, he learned about sights he would not see. The Empire State Building. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Central Park. The Botanical Gardens. He flipped through the index, looking at the piece of paper he'd taken from his father. Their meeting point.

Out in the daylight, Nathaniel blinks and tries to orient himself. Everything is so new and so different. The buildings taller than the tallest trees. The light unrestrained by cloud, the sound so loud he has to close his eyes to be able to process it (there, the thumping bass of reggae music; there, the distant sound of jackhammers; there, voices arguing; there, a

baby crying). After so much silence, he has auditory culture shock, if such a thing exists.

He's jolted back to the moment when someone pushes past him. It's a rude gesture, a New York gesture, even, but he relishes the human touch. He's been alone for two weeks, but it might as well be an eternity, and he'll take what he can get.

Still, when another passerby hisses at him to move it, he does. He retreats out of the flow of traffic, under an awning. From here, he can watch. There are people, more people that he's ever seen in one place, doing everything fast, from smoking cigarettes to having animated conversations on their cell phones. No one looks at him.

He didn't really consider this. The people. The city. A rush of regret because he won't have time to experience it. Now where is he meant to be going again? The subway, an alphabet soup of letters and numbers. His was easy. The A train. According to the map at the airport, the bus should've dropped him off right on the corner where the subway was supposed to be. But he's not on the corner, but in the middle of a long block. He walks to the nearest corner. The street sign reads: *Forty-Second Street*. Across the street is a park, a patch of green amid the skyscrapers. Which is nice, unexpected—even the park seems surprised to find itself here—but that doesn't help him figure out where he is and where he's supposed to be.

"I have lost my way," he says to the stream of pedestrians. "Can anyone tell me where the A train is?"

But they keep moving, a million-limbed organism rather than individual people, and then there's Nathaniel, the amputee.

On the plane, in the guidebook, he'd read that Manhattan was a grid, avenues running north-south, streets east-west, street numbers going higher as you go north, the avenues dividing into east and west with Fifth Avenue running down the middle like a spine. If you were lost, the book said, the landmarks could help you get your bearings: the Twin Towers to the south, the Empire State Building to the north.

The Twin Towers, he knows, are gone. It's a sort of hubris to put something like that in a book as a landmark, a guidepost, to assume it will always be there.

"One day we'll go to New York City," his father had promised him, scratching it onto the list on the inside wall of his closet. "One day we'll go to Mount Denali," his father had promised him.

"What about the Shire?" Nathaniel had asked when he was too little to know the difference between places real and imagined.

"Sure," his dad had promised. "We'll go there too."

Yellow taxis pass by, looking like they did in the TV shows he and his father used to occasionally watch in between the documentaries. He could just take a taxi to his final destination. He pulls out his wallet, furtively counting the rest of his cash (the guidebook warned: "Be wary of pickpockets and scam artists"). After emptying out the bank account, there

had been enough money for the plane ticket, the bus fare to and from the airport, and about a hundred and twenty bucks left over. Part of him had known that going anywhere, let alone New York City, with so small a cushion was folly. But that was just the point. Remove the net. Eliminate the possibility of backtracking.

Still, after so long being prudent and frugal, he can't completely shed his old ways. He decides against getting a taxi. He has no idea how much the trip will cost. He smells like country, like a rube, and maybe the driver will rip him off. ("Be wary of pickpockets and scam artists.") And besides, he doesn't know how to make a taxi stop. He sees how other people do it, stepping into the street, sticking out a hand, but suspects if he did that, the cars would pass right by.

He pulls out his phone, missing his father so much it aches. He dials the number. Three rings before the call goes to voicemail. "Tell me something good," his father's recording says.

"Hey, Dad," Nathaniel says. "I made it."

He hangs up the phone, opens the guidebook, and thumbs through for the big map in the middle. He finds Forty-Second Street and draws a line across it until he finds a square block of green, amazed, relieved, ebullient, even, that there's some representation, some proof, of where he is.

The patch of green is Bryant Park. Sixth Avenue, which runs up the west side of the park, dead-ends at Central Park. Central Park! That was one of the places in the book. To the

left of the park he sees the big blue circle for the A train. He could walk there. Why not?

He sets off, feeling the same lightness he'd experienced when he'd made the decision to come here. He passes Fiftieth Street, the signs blaring for Rockefeller Center, more people crossing at a single intersection than in his entire graduating class. He passes Fifty-Fourth Street and sees signs for the Museum of Modern Art, and though he's not visiting it, he feels like he's seen some of it. ("One day we'll see the *Mona Lisa*," his father had promised, and though Nathaniel is fairly certain the *Mona Lisa* is not here, it still feels like he has made a little good on that promise.)

He gets to Central Park faster than he thought. Too fast. He can see that the western edge reaches the big circle where the A train is, but he opens up the map in his book again. The park itself runs to 110th Street. He can walk there. Or all the way up. On the bus before he'd fallen asleep, he'd caught a glimpse of the looming Manhattan skyline from across the river just before they'd entered the tunnel. It seemed inconceivable that he could breach such a fortress, but here he is. He can afford to take his time. His father will understand.

Entering the park, he's surprised by how familiar it seems. It's an entirely different kind of nature from what he grew up in, but it turns out that trees are trees, flowers are flowers, birds are birds, wind is wind.

Overhead, the sun is a little west of high noon. He knows where he is. He knows which way is north. He abandons the

main roadway for one of the smaller paths. He might get a little lost, but the sleep has shaken away from him. He feels more awake and alive than he has in days. He knows where he's going.

The path winds under a small arched bridge, a tunneled portal into the park. He examines the bricks. They're so old, the keystone binding the two seams is almost invisible. Under the bridge the air is dark and musty. He holds his breath, like he used to when they would drive through tunnels, his father encouraging him in the longer ones (*You're almost there, buddy*).

I'm almost there, he tells his father as he steps out of the tunnel. He feels a rush of air that turns out to be Freya falling, but he doesn't have time to see see that, much less comprehend it, because she has landed on top of him and everything has gone black.

THE ORDER OF LOSS
PART I

FREYA

When I was one minute old, I sang my first song. That was the story my father told me. When I was born, I didn't cry or make a sound, and for a minute, my father said, his heart stopped because he thought there was something wrong with me. All the doctors and nurses swooped in. Then I made a noise, not a baby noise, not a cry or a grunt, but something undeniably musical. "It was a perfect A sharp," my father told me, sustained for at least a second or two. The medical personnel all started laughing in relief. "You were born singing," my father told me. "And you haven't stopped since."

"That's dumb," my sister Sabrina declared. "Babies aren't born doing anything, let alone singing." But she just said that because she was jealous. Our father hadn't been in the delivery room when she was born four years before me. He was out playing a gig, and by the time he got word Mom was in labor, Sabrina had already arrived, and though nobody reported it, I would guess she was born not singing but scowling.

Maybe because he was in the delivery room, maybe be-

cause I was born singing, or maybe because we looked alike, I belonged to my father, and Sabrina to my mother. It was almost like they decided on a split-custody arrangement before they even got divorced. Sabrina would spend her evenings with Mom, doing crossword puzzles or rearranging the kitchen cabinets. I would spend my afternoons with my father, huddled in the tiny closet he used as a studio. There, amid boxes of old LPs and cassettes, he would play me recordings of his favorite artists: American singers like Billie Holliday and Nina Simone and Josephine Baker, and Ethiopian singers like Aster Aweke and Gigi. "Hear how they sing their sorrows? How they sing what they can't say?" He'd show me pictures of these women, who had beautiful voices and beautiful faces. "Blessed twice like the jacaranda tree," he'd say. "Like you."

There were no jacaranda trees in White Plains, where we lived at the time, but my father had already told me about how in spring in Addis Ababa, they bloomed with magnificent blossoms, purple and fragrant, blessed twice. He told me about how in winters, which were cold but nothing like here, the air filled with the smell of eucalyptus smoke. He told me of his mother's cooking, which he missed so much. The *tibs* she would make for him, the *shiro*, the goat they would roast before the fasting holidays, the fermented *injera* bread. He took me into the city to restaurants that served his favorite foods, which became my favorite foods. He let me sip the bitter coffee and the sweet honey wine. He showed me how to eat with my fingers, not dropping any bits. *"Konjo, konjo,"* the

waitresses who looked like me would say to him. "Beautiful."

He promised one day he would take me to Ethiopia with him. He promised one day he would take me to the clubs in New York City where once upon a time Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, and John Coltrane had played. He promised one day he'd take me to hear his hero, the Ethiopian jazz musician Mulatu Astatke, whose career he had moved to America to emulate. "People thought it was not possible to combine the Ethiopian and the American, but listen to the proof," he would say, playing me recordings of Astatke. "And look at the proof," he would say, smiling at me.

"Sing with me, Freaulai," he would say, and I would sing. And whenever I did, he closed his eyes and smiled. "Born singing."

"Be quiet!" my sister would call from the other room. Like my mother, she had no interest in Astatke or *tibs* or ever going to Ethiopia. "We live here," they would tell my father when he mused about moving us home, nearer to his family. "We are your family," they would tell him.

"Stop singing!" Sabrina would yell if I didn't shut up.

"Promise me you'll never stop singing," my father would whisper to me.

I promised. Unlike him, I kept my promises.

— — —

Sabrina claimed that once upon a time, our parents laughed together and danced in the living room. That Mom used to go to our father's gigs, googly-eyed, convinced that love could

overcome the wide gap between a Jewish girl from Westchester and a jazz musician from Addis.

Sabrina said that all changed when I came along. Was this true? Or was this Sabrina being Sabrina? Sabrina, who would squeeze my wrist until she left red marks. "Love twists," she called them, to remind me who loved me. Sabrina, who would whisper in my ear: "Your breath stinks. Your hair is nappy," and who grew angry if I cried. "If people who love you can't tell you the truth, who can?" she'd say.

As for my parents once loving each other, I couldn't say. The staccato beat and locked horns of their fights were nearly as constant a soundtrack to my childhood as the music my father played me. Though like so many things, I didn't really realize this until the sound stopped and silence engulfed us.

— — —

When I was ten years old, I came home from school one day to find my father awake, which was unusual enough. He was a driver for a car service at night in the city, getting off late and trying to get a minute or two on stage somewhere at the dwindling number of clubs in the Village. He often came home as Sabrina and I were getting up for school and slept until it was time to work again that evening. But that day, he was up. The table was set with the round platters of Ethiopian food.

I was so excited by the meal and my father being home that I failed to notice his packed bag and trumpet case in the hall. But I wouldn't have thought much of it. It was not un-

usual for my father to go on short tours, though it hadn't happened for a few years.

"Where are you going?" asked Sabrina, who had noticed.

"My mother is sick," he replied, serving us big portions of food. "I am going home to visit her."

"Will she be okay?" I asked. I had never met Ayate. She was too frail to travel, and my mother said we didn't have enough money to afford the tickets to Ethiopia.

"She will be fine," my father said.

"When are you coming back?" Sabrina asked.

"Soon, Sipara."

Sabrina frowned. She did not like it when he used her Ethiopian name. "How soon?" she asked.

"Soon," he repeated. "Is there anything you want me to bring back?"

"Will you bring us one of those white dresses?" I asked. I'd seen them on the women at the restaurant and in the pictures of my cousins. They were beautiful, gauzy and white, with delicate embroidery. I desperately wanted one.

"A *habesha kemis*?" He smiled. "I promise." He looked at Sabrina. "Do you want me to bring you one?"

"No, thank you."

We finished eating and he stood to leave. He had tears in his eyes as he held me close and sang to me, not the Billie Holiday or Nina Simone songs we sang together but "Tschay Hailu," the rhythmic lullaby he used to sing to me every night. *Eshuruuruuru, eshuruuruuru, ye binyea enate tolo neyelete dabowen baheya wetetune beguya yezeshelet neye yezeshelet neye.*

"Sing with me, Freaulai," he said, and I did.

When the song was over, he pushed me away to arm's length, tears streaming down his face. "Promise me you will never stop singing."

I said what I always said—that I promised.

He wiped his face, picked up his suitcase and trumpet, and left. I chased him to the hallway. "Don't forget the white dress," I called.

But he was already gone.

— — —

My grandmother died five weeks later. I cried, not because I was sad but because my father would be staying for the funeral and to settle her affairs. And the weeks without him had already been enough. With him absent, my family was like a three-legged chair.

"How much longer?" I asked over the crackling phone line when he'd been gone two months.

"Not much longer," he said.

"And you won't forget the white dress?"

"I won't forget."

I hung up the phone. Sabrina was standing there. She had spoken to him for only a few moments, monosyllabic yes/no answers. It was like she didn't miss him at all. But why should she? She belonged to our mother, and our mother was still here.

She had her arms crossed in front of her chest and was looking at me with the same mean expression she wore when

she pointed out some flaw of mine. "You know he's not coming back, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

"He's home now," she said. "He doesn't want to come back."

"But we're here."

"Mom was going to kick him out anyway," Sabrina said. "You think he'd come back just for you?"

"You're just being mean."

She looked at me. She was fourteen years old, but she already had a stare that could make a grown-up flinch. "He took his trumpet, Freya. Why would he take his trumpet if he was coming back?"

"Maybe he wanted to play music for Ayate," I said.

"He's not coming back," Sabrina said.

"Yes he is!" I screamed at her. "You're just jealous because he loves me more. Because I can sing. He's coming back!"

She didn't even seem mad. She looked at me almost pityingly. Because she knew. Sabrina always knew.

"No, he's not."

— — —

A few months after that I received a package in the mail. The stamps bore the squiggly, indecipherable writing of Amharic and showed that the package had been mailed weeks before.

Inside was a white dress. It was beautiful. White and gauzy, embroidered with purple and gold thread. It fit me perfectly. There was a note from my father. *I promised*, it said.

And that was when I knew Sabrina was right.

I threw the dress into the trash. Then I went to my room and climbed into bed and began to cry.

"What's gotten into you?" Mom asked when she found me there that night. It was still several weeks before she would sit me and Sabrina down in a booth at the Star Diner and solemnly announce what we already knew: that she and our father were getting divorced; that he was staying in Addis for the foreseeable future but they'd work something out so we could go visit. Another promise unkept.

I didn't answer. I just kept crying into my pillow.

"I don't know what's with her," I heard my mother tell Sabrina. "Or how to snap her out of it."

That was my father's job. He was the one who sat with me when I was sick or scared. He was the one who didn't ask for explanations when sometimes I was just so overcome with emotions I didn't know what to do. "Sing what you can't say, Freaulai," he would say, and I would and I'd feel better.

I was still crying when I heard the door creak open. It was not my mother, who had come in several times and admonished me to cut it out. It was Sabrina.

Silently, she climbed into the bed, and then my sister, who did not like to be hugged or kissed or even touched, wrapped her body around mine. "Don't worry," she murmured. "I'll take care of you now."

But I didn't believe her. Sabrina, who delivered love pinches and scathing critiques. Who hated *shiro* and *tibs* and told me to be quiet when I sang. How would she take care of me?

As if she heard my doubts, my sister began to sing to me. *Eshurururuu, eshurururuu ye binyea enate tolo.* I had never heard my sister sing, not even on holidays. I didn't know she could sing. And yet she sang the lullaby in a clear, pure voice. She sang it as if she too had been born singing.

"Sing with me," she said

And I did. *Eshurururuu, eshurururuu, sefecheme azeyea segagere azeyea seserame azeyea sehedeme azeyea yenima biniyea werede ke jerbayea*. We lay together, singing, harmonizing without even trying. Our voices blended perfectly, easily, in a way that in real life we never did.

We sang and I stopped crying. I believed that as long as we sang together, I would be okay.

THE ORDER OF LOSS
PART II

HARUN

When I was nine, Ammi announced that her sister's family from Pakistan was coming to visit. I was very excited. I'd never met Khala and Khalu or my three cousins. Usna was nineteen, too old to be of interest, but the twins, Amir and Ayisha, were my age. Ayisha was loud and rebellious and made fast friends with my younger sister, Halima, sneaking off to the 7-Eleven, buying Little Debbie snack cakes and Doritos.

That left me with Amir, who was small, quiet and circumspect, the opposite of his sister. He did not want to go to the movies or play miniature golf or even venture into Manhattan to see the sights. So we stayed around the house, playing board games or lying on our backs in the yard, watching the planes take off from Newark Airport. "That's Continental Airlines flight seventeen, bound for Los Angeles," I told Amir. When he asked how I knew, I showed him the notebook I kept with all the flight departures and arrivals. I'd kept it hidden since Saif had warned me that if anyone saw it, they'd

get the wrong idea. But Amir didn't think the notebook was weird, and when I confessed my dream of one day being a pilot, he didn't think that was crazy either. "You can fly to Pakistan and visit me," Amir told me.

Amir went to prayer with his father every day, and that week I joined them even though I normally only went with Abu on Fridays and holidays.

"Your cousin is making you devout," Abu said.

"Your cousin is turning you into a kiss-ass," Saif said.

One day, I came back from mosque to find Ammi and Khala sitting at the dining room table, where Ammi often worked. Her ledgers were spread out, her cup of tea steaming. Khala was complaining about Ayisha, who had been sneaking junk food and hiding the evidence in the trash, where Ammi discovered it because Ammi discovered everything, be it missing receipts or misbehaving children.

"She's already so fat," Khala said, shaking her head.

"She should not lie," Ammi said, inputting a receipt and transferring it from one pile to the other.

"I'm less worried about the lying than her getting fat," Khala replied. "More fat."

Ammi clucked her tongue.

"She's already at a disadvantage," Khala continued. "Amir must have sucked all the beauty away from her when they were in the womb. It would be easier to find Amir a husband than Ayisha,"

I didn't totally understand what they were talking about,

but the idea of Amir finding a husband gave me a strange tickling in my tummy.

After that, I could not stop sneaking looks at Amir. He *was* pretty. He had long eyelashes that were apparently enviable and hair that made a little exclamation point in the middle of his forehead, and his lips were red and shiny, the way Halima's were when she sneaked on the berry lip gloss she kept hidden in her backpack. I watched how his lips formed a bow when he drank soda through a straw, and I imagined what it might be like to be that straw between Amir's lips.

"*What?*" Amir asked, catching me staring at him drinking a Sprite.

And there it was, that tickling feeling.

During *'Asr* that day, I found myself drifting, murmuring the prayers while staring at my cousin's ear. How had I never noticed ears before? The intricacies, the folds, the delicate pearl of the lobes, which on some people, like Abu, stuck to the neck, while on others, like Amir, were unattached. I touched my own ear as if for the first time, and the tickling feeling returned.

That night, we all watched a movie. We chose *Aladdin*, because the cousins had never seen it. Khalu disapproved of the way Islam was depicted. "Also," Amir added, "with how immodestly Jasmine is dressed."

We all huddled around the television in the basement and turned on the TV. The older kids seemed bored by it. Saif kept trying to do all the Robin Williams parts, but it had been

a long time since he'd last seen the movie and he ruined it.

"Shh!" I said, on behalf of the cousins.

"This movie sucks," Abdullah said.

"It's giving me flashbacks," Saif said. "I used to be so hot for Jasmine."

"This is not appropriate talk for the children," Usna said primly.

"They don't even know what we're talking about," Saif said.

I do, I wanted to say. Only I didn't. Not entirely, though I felt certain it was tied up with Ammi and Khala's conversation about Amir, and with the strange tickling in my stomach.

I knew Jasmine was meant to be pretty and her manner of dress sexy, and I knew she was an object of desire by the way my brother was talking. But I didn't care about Jasmine. It was Aladdin I couldn't take my eyes off of. His face was pretty, delicate, kind of like Amir's. And the scenes with Aladdin bare-chested made that tickling in my belly stronger than ever.

We finished *Aladdin* and started watching *The Little Mermaid*, but the DVD was scratched, and halfway through we gave up and went to bed.

We had shuffled around to accommodate everyone's sleeping arrangements. Amir and I had been relegated to a leaking blow-up mattress in the living room. We'd been sleeping there all week and nothing had happened, save for a crick or two in my neck.

That night, I dreamed of Aladdin. We were on a carpet,

only not the one from the movie but one from the mosque. I could smell the musky scent of it in the dream.

Aladdin was bare-chested, and I was running my hand over his smooth skin. And he was not a cartoon; he was real. In the dream, Aladdin became Amir. And we were flying. And I was holding on to Amir's chest as Jasmine had done to Aladdin.

The mattress shifted. I opened my eyes slightly, and the tickling sensation blossomed into something stronger, a tingling over my entire body, a throbbing between my legs.

A cool breeze rustled through a gap in the window, and I opened my eyes all the way and saw that in sleep, I had wrapped myself around Amir. My hand was on his chest, warm and sticky. My heart felt full. I understood in that moment that this was who I was.

The mattress moved again, and Amir opened his eyes. "What—?" he began to ask, in that same guilty way he'd asked earlier when he thought he was about to be chastised for drinking too much soda. He looked at my hand. "What are you doing?"

I snatched my hand away. "Mosquito," I lied.

He rolled over and went back to sleep, but I lay in bed rigid, afraid that if I got too close, he would know, as I suddenly knew, that there was something very wrong with me. The next night, I moved to the couch, claiming Amir kicked, and after that I rebuffed his requests to do more plane-spotting. He seemed hurt, but hurt was better than disgusted.

The Friday after the cousins left, Abu asked me if I want-

ed to go to *'Asr* again. I liked going to mosque with him, having time alone with him. But I'd been taught that Allah could see into our hearts. He would see me. I knew I couldn't let that happen. I told Abu that I didn't want to go anymore.

Abu sighed and frowned, but he didn't argue. Saif had paved the road for me. He thought I was just being rebellious. I was just being American. I let him think that.

It was the first time I lied to him.

THE ORDER OF LOSS
PART III

NATHANIEL

When I was seven years old my father read me The Lord of the Rings for the first time.

"Don't tell your mother," he whispered.

"Why is he still awake?" my mother would complain when a half hour later we were still reading, and I was more keyed up than ever, visions of orcs and elves swimming in my head. "You're supposed to be putting him to sleep."

Then my father would conceal the book under the covers and wink at me. "You and me," he'd whisper after she'd left. "Like Frodo and Sam."

"A fellowship," I'd reply, giggling.

"A fellowship of two." He reached for a pen and scratched some note into the margin of his book before hiding it under my bed.

A fellowship of two—and Mom. The two of us wandering through the forests, looking for edible mushrooms one day, ents the next. The two of us staying out all night to catch a lunar eclipse (unseen, thanks to the omnipresent clouds).

The two of us climbing trees, or building forts, or taking off on an impromptu road trip, never mind that there was school and we hadn't brought any extra clothes. "Why do we need that, buddy?" Dad would say. "We have each other. We're all we need."

When Mom announced that she was leaving, I wasn't even that sad. We had each other, after all.

"I'm so sorry, Nathaniel," she told me. "But I can't live with two children anymore." She wanted me to move with her to California, where it was sunny. "Doesn't that sound nice?" No, it did not. I didn't want to go to California. I wanted to stay here, in my house, with my friends and my father. We were a fellowship, after all.

"I'm not leaving you alone with that man-child," my mother said, and when I told Dad about that, he invited Grandma Mary to come live with us.

"And if she's so mature, why's she runnin' off on an eight-year-old lad?" Mary asked the day she moved in, dropping her flowered suitcase on the entry hall floor and extracting a pair of rubber gloves from her pocketbook, as if anticipating, correctly, the pile of dirty dishes in the sink. "Never you mind," she told me as she scrubbed three-day-old scrambled egg off a plate. "I brung up your father, and I'll bring up you." She glanced at my father, who was on the sofa in his pajamas, reading the funny pages. "Bring up both of you, it seems."

Dad winked at me, and I knew what he was thinking without him saying it. It was Just Us. A fellowship of two.

Once Grandma Mary moved in, she took over what had

been my parents' bedroom, and Dad moved into the spare bed in my room. And just like that, he seemed to fully relinquish a role that had never fully fit in the first place. No more father and son, now we were truly a fellowship. We would stay up late in the night, talking about anything and everything: Was there intelligent life out there? Dad was sure of it. And could it be that we weren't really living but were part of some video game someone else was playing? Dad thought it was a possibility. We talked about the places we might go one day. Dad wanted to see the hidden temples of Angkor Wat. I wanted to go to New York City because I'd started staying up to watch *SNL* and wanted to see it filmed.

"Done and done," Dad promised, adding the places to our list. "We'll do it all. We'll see the world, together."

"A fellowship of two," I said.

It went on like this for years. I lived my life, went to school, and played soccer in the fall, baseball in the spring. I was getting pretty good as a pitcher and a first baseman, and the coach said I might get into a traveling league. Grandma Mary did the grocery shopping and cleaning and took care of me and Dad.

Dad still worked as an IT guy, but he didn't have a steady job anymore; he was what he called a freelancer. Mom called it something else, but after a few years she remarried and had another kid, and stopped complaining about how much Dad worked, stopped asking me if I wanted to come live with her in California.

Grandma Mary was a creature of habit. She wore the

same smocked apron every day. She went to the same mass every Sunday. She smelled of Nivea and Palmolive, and she always coughed. So no one noticed at first when the coughing got worse, more hacking and wet. And no one noticed the blood-speckled tissues that Grandma Mary coughed into, because she flushed them down the toilet.

When she caught a cold that turned into pneumonia, a chest X-ray revealed lung cancer. Stage four, the doctors said.

I had a teammate named Tyler whose uncle had recently died of colon cancer. He was the one who told me what stage four meant. Dad refused to believe it. He insisted Mary would be okay. "Not with stage four she won't," Tyler said.

"My dad's going to figure it out," I told Tyler, because that's what Dad had insisted. He spent hours on the internet, ordering healing crystals one day and shark-fin powder the next. At one point, he was all set to charge airplane tickets to Israel, where some new stem cell treatment was being offered, only to be stymied when the charge was declined.

"She's going to beat this," he insisted.

Meanwhile, Mary grew sicker. She underwent two rounds of chemotherapy and then put a stop to it. "How can I take care of you two if I'm running for the toilet every five minutes?" she asked.

One day, I came home from baseball practice to find Grandma Mary collapsed on the floor. Dad sat beside her, legs crossed, holding her hand, tears streaming down his face.

"Is she dead?" I asked.

"I don't know, I don't know," Dad replied.

I rushed to her, put a finger on her neck as I'd seen done on TV, and felt a pulse there. I was only eleven years old, but I stayed calm, like I already knew what to do, like I'd been preparing for this moment.

When the paramedics arrived, one of them asked, "How long has she been unresponsive?"

I looked at Dad, who was sitting in that same place on the floor, even though he was in the paramedics' way. "How long?"

"I don't know. I don't know," Dad replied, swaying back and forth.

Mary stayed in the hospital for three weeks. The doctors said she probably wouldn't leave.

"Like hell she won't," Dad said. And he insisted on bringing her home. "What she needs is to be out of this institution, away from all those poisons they're pumping into her."

Mary was in no place to make such a decision; Dad was the official adult. The doctors had no choice but to listen to him.

But it was me who met with the hospice coordinator. Who filled out all the paperwork, who got Dad to sign on the dotted line, who arranged for a hospital bed to be delivered to our house and for the hospice nurse to visit.

The hospice nurse was named Hector. He came every day that whole summer Mary lay dying, at first just for an hour or so to adjust her pain meds and make sure she was comfortable.

"Where's your father?" he would ask me on the days when Dad was absent.

"Oh, at work," I would lie. I didn't know where Dad was. Out on a walk. Playing pool. Hunting for the cure for cancer out in the woods.

As Grandma Mary grew sicker, Hector stayed longer and longer, all afternoon, even toward the end when all she did was sleep. Sometimes he lingered in the kitchen with me, once frying me me what looked like a green banana but turned out to be something called a plantain, and which was delicious. Other times, he sat with Mary, rubbing lotion onto her hands, combing her hair, talking to her, singing to her.

"Can she hear you?" I asked him once.

"I believe she can." He beckoned me closer. I didn't like to be in the sick room. It smelled sour, like slightly off milk, and Mary made a terrible rattling sound as she labored for breath. But with Hector I didn't feel so scared.

I stood by his side as he ministered to my grandmother. The look on his face was serene, even happy. I didn't understand. "Isn't it sad watching so many people die?" I asked.

"We all die," Hector said, rubbing Mary's wrists. "It's the only sure thing in life and the one thing we have in common with everything else on the planet." He let go of her hand and put it in mine. I could feel her pulse, rabbity and weak.

"I think it's an honor to be with people as they leave the world," he told me.

"An honor?"

"An honor," he replied. "And a calling. You know, I was about your age when I realized I wanted to do this."

"Really?"

"Maybe not so concretely, but yes. I was with my own grandmother when she was dying. This was back home in Washington Heights, in New York City. She had barely spoken in weeks, but right before she passed, she sat up and came alive, carrying on a two-hour conversation with someone in the room. In Spanish. And I didn't really speak Spanish, so I knew she wasn't talking to me."

"Who was she talking to?"

"Only she knew for sure, but I felt certain it was my grandfather. He'd been dead for twenty years. I never even met him. But at that moment, I knew he was in the room with her, there to escort her to what was next."

Chills went up my spine.

"I've seen this happen more times than I can count," Hector continued. "The dying speaking to the dead. The dead leading the dying to what's next."

"What *is* next?" I asked.

He smiled. "That I don't know. And unfortunately, none of us finds out until it's our turn, and then we're in no position to report back."

Two weeks later, Grandma Mary died quietly. If someone came to escort her to what was next, they did so silently.

"It's just us," my father said when they took Mary's body away. Only for the first time it felt less like a promise than a threat.

2

IT'S ALL GOOD

It's all good, Nathaniel tries to say.

Only he can't seem to talk. Or move. Or think too clearly. Or see the shadowy person hovering over him, stroking his forehead, asking him to please, please wake up.

The stroking feels nice, though.

Everything else, not so nice.

"Can you hear me?" the voice asks. "Can you move?"

It's a beautiful voice. Even in his current state he can hear this. If a voice could emit a scent, this one would smell like dates.

Grandma Mary used to buy dried dates. They ate them and spat the pits into the yard, hoping a date tree would grow, but dates grow in the desert, and he lives in the forest.

Lived in the forest.

There's breath against his neck, whispery and warm. The breath says: "Open your eyes. Wake up."

"Please," the breath says.

It's the *please* that does it. There's something so raw, so plaintive in it. How can he not obey?

He opens his eyes. A pair of eyes stare back at him. They are maybe the loveliest eyes he's ever seen. And the saddest. So sad, they could be his eyes, except they are brown and his eyes—eye—is green.

"What's your name?" the Stroker whispers into his ear. And that voice. It sends a shiver down his spine, not because it's beautiful, smelling of dates, but because it's familiar and it can't be familiar because he doesn't know a soul in . . . where is he? It doesn't matter. He doesn't know a soul in the world with a voice like that.

"What's your name?" the voice repeats.

His name. He knows his name. It's just there, on the highest shelf in the back of the closet. He's got to reach for it. It's . . .

"Nathaniel," the voice says. "Nathaniel Haley. Is that you?"

Yes! That's him! Nathaniel Haley. How does she know?

"From Washington State."

Yes! he wants to shout. From a house on the edge of a forest that's been swallowed up. How does she know?

"And you just arrived here . . . today."

Yes. Yes. Yes. But how does she know?

"Welcome to New York," she says. "Pro tip: Don't leave your wallet in your pocket. Any old person can get it."

His wallet. He tries to summon it. He sees a billfold. A picture of him and Dad.

"Can you sit up?" the Stroker asks. Nathaniel doesn't want to sit up, but there are those fingertips, and that voice, calling,

Nathaniel, Nathaniel, come back. And that voice, so familiar it's like an itch, and so beautiful, it's like a song. He can heave himself up. To see the voice.

For one lovely moment, it's worth the effort, to be face-to-face with that face. Until . . .

The pain is on a delay, and it catches up with him—it always catches up with you, he knows—and his head is symphonic with it, his stomach undulating with feedback. It undoes him. He is afloat, not of this world. He needs an anchor, and he finds it in the Stroker's beautiful, sad eyes.

A small rivulet of blood—or two of them, because everything is double—drips down her temple and onto her cheek. It looks like a teardrop, and for a second Nathaniel thinks she is crying for him.

Only Nathaniel knows that can't be. Tears are not blood-colored, and no one cries for him. Still, he is riveted by the trail the bloody tear tracks down her cheek. It is the prettiest of flowers, the loveliest of scars. He reaches out to touch her cheek. And though everything is tilted and blurry and double, he does not miss, and though she is beautiful and a stranger, she does not recoil.

— — —

No, Freya does not recoil, but her insides undulate too. No one touches me like that anymore, she thinks. Which is a strange thing to think because these days she's touched all the time, by stylists and trainers, by her mother, by a series

of doctors, by Hayden and the execs from the label, who let their hands linger on her shoulders, her legs, her waist, just a moment longer than is comfortable. All these people who are there for her, to help her, their touch feels dead, but this stranger's touch just made her heart trip.

What the fuck?

— — —

The blood from her cheek is on Nathaniel's finger. He does not know what to do with it. Wipe it? Lick it? Transfuse it?

"Hey, you," the Stroker calls. "You think you might give us a hand over here?"

The "you" in question approaches and begins to snap right in front Nathaniel's eyes.

This is extremely unpleasant.

"I'm not sure that's necessary," she says. "He's awake."

The snapping continues. "Are you okay?" the Snapper asks.

You're doing okay, aren't you? People used to ask Nathaniel that sometimes—the teammates he practiced with, the girls who used to flutter around him, the coaches who thought he had promise. *You're doing okay?* they asked. After Mom left. After Grandma Mary died. After he lost his eye. *You're all right, aren't you?*

(Just us, buddy.)

Later, Nathaniel figured out it wasn't really a question. People wanted reassurances; they wanted to be let off the hook, so even though he wasn't all right or okay, even though

he was a frog boiling in a pot, even though he was being swallowed up by the ground beneath him, he answered: "It's all good."

Which is such an obvious lie. When are things ever *all* good?

But people eat it up. When he tells them it's all good, they smile. Their relief is always palpable and always heartbreaking because Nathaniel has once again allowed himself to think they meant it this time. He's like Charlie Brown with that stupid football.

If you need anything, just holler, they say, reciting lines in a script. To which Nathaniel answers, on cue, *You bet*. And it hurts worse for allowing himself to hope.

Nope. He's not falling for that again. He's not winding up flat on his back. He's already flat on his back.

He starts to stand up.

"Help him up," the Stroker demands, and she takes one hand, the Snapper taking the other.

Give me your hand, Nat, his dad used to say as he taught him to climb trees, higher and higher, above the canopy, where he claimed you could see all the way to Canada. His mom would get so angry. "I don't know who's the bigger child."

He's steadier now. He's fine.

(Not fine, not really, but upright.)

He just needs a moment here, to gather his wits, to gain his bearings, to have his hands held by two strangers before they let go.

"Are you okay?" the Snapper asks again.

"It's all . . ." he begins to tell them, to release them of culpability. And before he can finish the sentence, before he can say the word *good*, he throws up. Right onto the Stroker's feet.

— — —

Freya stares at her feet. Soiled with vomit. She has a short fuse these days. Anything sets her off: traffic lights taking too long, the weather report being off by three degrees, anything anyone says to her.

Some random stranger just puked on her feet.

And she feels like crying, but not because she's annoyed or grossed out.

What the fuck?

She excuses herself to clean her feet.

— — —

That Harun is a coward is not up for debate.

When he saw the girl fall from the bridge onto the boy below, what was his first impulse? Was it to run to their aid? To call an ambulance? To get help?

No, it was to flee.

Again, to restate: his cowardice is not up for debate.

The reason Harun wanted to run, initially, was that he had this terrible feeling that the accident was his fault. Moments before, he had been essentially cursing both of those people for not being James. Even if he had not asked for it in

so many words, he had asked for it in intention—which is, he knows, what God listens to. People lie all the time about what they want, but intentions are pure.

So at first, he had stood by and tried to think of the appropriate prayer to say when you accidentally ask God to do something bad to other people. *As'alu Allah al 'azim rabbil 'arshil azim an yashifika* was all he came up with, asking Allah to cure them. (He's given up asking that for himself.)

But he would like the record to show, when he saw the heap of bodies, imagining them both dead, or at the very least gravely injured by his thoughts, he snapped himself out of his fugue state and walked closer, planning to Do the Right Thing—administer CPR, call 911, say the correct prayer.

But at that particular point, the bodies disentangled and the young female portion of the heap sat up. He was close, close enough to see her face: the sharp cheekbones, the prominent oval eyes, the regal neck. And then she'd asked him for his help. With that voice.

"One day, we'll meet her," James used to say as they huddled around his phone, watching one of her videos. "We'll tell her how we're her first, biggest fans. She'll be famous, bigger than Beyoncé, but we'll be best friends. She'll sing at our wedding."

Statements like that took Harun's breath away. It seemed greedy enough for him to imagine a future with James, let alone things like a wedding, let alone a wedding where James's favorite singer, whom they'd never met, would sing.

Now, as he watches her throw away her shoes and rinse

her feet with a bottle of Poland Spring, he has three thoughts.

The first is: *It can't be her.* There is simply no way. Not this person, in this park, on this day. He is conjuring her as a way to bring back James.

His second thought: *James, whose last words to me were* Get the fuck out my life.

His third thought: *If it is her, James will have to forgive me.*

The young man he's holding heaves against Harun, and Harun turns his glance away from her to him. Him, he now sees, is very good looking, the kind of pretty white boy James called a "confection."

"I'm all good," the confection keeps saying, even as he sways like a green tree in a strong gale.

She (he can't bring himself to even think her name) returns, barefoot, and takes hold of her half of the swaying tree of a confection. Harun can't look at her face, so he stares at her feet. Which are still wet.

"Thanks for your help," she says in that husky voice of hers.

"Uhh," says Harun.

"It's all good," the swaying tree of a confection says.

It doesn't look all good to Harun. Aside from the swaying, there's the eyes. Two different colors. Can a fall do that?

"Is there someone we can call?" she asks.

James, thinks Harun. But no, this isn't about him. He turns to the swaying tree, who is squinting as if someone just asked him the square root of 17,432.

"Dad?" Nathaniel says at last.

"Dad. So your father's here?" she asks.

Nathaniel sways and nods.

"Do you have a way to contact him?"

Harun sees the phone on the path, alongside the other spilled contents of his backpack. He scrambles to pick it up. "Perhaps you can call?"

The swaying tree of a confection opens the phone, one of those ancient flip numbers, and presses a button. It rings loudly enough for them all to hear. The voicemail picks up. A man's voice: "Tell me something good."

The command irks Harun. What if there's nothing good to tell? What then?

There's a long beep, followed by a robotic voice that informs them the voicemail box is full, and Harun understands he must be in the minority, that lots of people have had so many good things to share that the voicemail box is full of good tidings.

"I think we should probably get you to a hospital, Nathaniel," she says, turning to Harun. "He seems pretty out of it."

Well, a human being did fall on him. And even though that human is *her* (he's almost certain), it must have hurt. Harun suspects the boy is concussed. Abdullah got hit with a cricket bat once and could not remember their address or his birth date.

"What do you think?" she asks.

It takes Harun a moment to realize *she* is asking him for his opinion. He responds, helpfully, with another "Uhhh . . ."

"Do you think you could see if there's one nearby?"

"Yes, yes, hospital, hospital," Harun says, his speech returning to him in double. He pulls out his phone, enormously relieved to have a focus for his attention that is not *her*. But his thumb has a mind of its own, because it's hovering over the text app, so tempted to tell James whom he is with, to snap a surreptitious picture. Surely, if James knew, he would relent. He would take him back.

"Did you find one?" she asks, and Harun feels his ears go red because this poor boy is clearly unwell and he is still thinking about James. Will he ever not be? Amir has promised him yes, that one day he will look back and not believe this happened. It will be wiped from the record.

He prays so.

He prays not.

She clears her throat.

He scuttles to the map, finds an urgent care clinic. "Yes, yes. There's one on Columbus Avenue. It says it's about a quarter mile from here by foot."

"Can you walk that far?" she asks Nathaniel. "If we help you?"

"We?" Harun blurts out in joy and relief and realizes, too late, that it sounds as if he is objecting to helping when it's the *we* that has tripped him up. "Yes, yes. Of course, of course. We will. We will."

"Really, you don't have to," Nathaniel says. "It's all good."

"I'm sure it is, but let's get you checked out by a doctor," she says. She bends down to pick up the rest of the contents

of his backpack, as if she were a normal human being and not *her*.

Harun should help—he is merely an ordinary person—but seeing the boxers, the books, the T-shirts makes him flash on the suitcase that Ammi has lovingly packed for him, full of new clothes, a new *kurta*, gifts. And when he does, he is paralyzed by shame. And here had thought he had plumbed the depths of his shame when, on the edge of this very park, James told him to get the fuck out of his life.

"Okay," she says, hoisting the backpack onto her shoulder. "Let's go."

"Really, you don't have to," Nathaniel says. "I'm meeting my dad later. It's all good."

"Stop saying that!" Harun is surprised and also abashed by the harshness of his tone. He has no reason to be angry with this boy, who may not be James but who was just walking through the park, minding his own business, when he was fallen on top of. It's not his fault if James asked Harun to believe that even if it wasn't all good, it might be, when Harun knows, has always known, it wasn't, it couldn't be.

It's the hoping that makes it hurt.

Harun knows that.

— — —

Nathaniel knows that.

— — —

Freya knows it too.

If she's perfectly honest, Freya can admit that her intentions are not completely honorable either. Now that the fog has cleared and she realizes what she's done—fallen off the bridge while staring at images of her happy sister, who said yes, onto some guy below—her concern is less for his well-being than her own.

She sees the situation through her mother's eyes—"He could sue us"—and Hayden's eyes—"the wrong kind of publicity"—and though she generally finds her mother in particular to be not just preemptively paranoid about people wanting to sue Freya, but aspirationally so (*dream it, be it*), Freya is properly assessing the situation.

She fell off a bridge, onto an innocent bystander. Some other guy watched the whole thing. He has a phone in his hand. For all she knows, he has the entire thing on film and is just waiting to email the photos to some gossip website or post them on Twitter. How many hits would that get? The one thing people love more than witnessing a success is watching a downfall.

The guy she fell on doesn't seem to recognize her (he doesn't seem to recognize himself), but the Lurker does. Back when Freya was getting big enough to start getting negative comments, she sometimes engaged with the haters. *Hey, I'm only human*, she might say. Or: *That hurt*. And it was crazy because sometimes they backed down. It's been a while since she's done that. Hayden has told her not to respond to the fans so directly anymore. Not even to look at

what they're saying about her. "That's my job now," he's said.

Still, the best way to defang someone is to kill them with kindness. Which is why she corralled the Lurker into helping get the guy, Nathaniel, to urgent care.

(It's prudence is all. It has nothing to do with the way her stomach flipped when Nathaniel touched her face.)

By the time they reach the urgent care clinic, Freya's feet are black and her mood even darker. She realizes she has just roped herself into something stupid, yoked herself to these two people who could do her harm. She should've called the publicist, but she's not sure she'll take her calls anymore.

"What seems to be the issue?" the receptionist at the urgent care asks.

"We were in the park," the Lurker explains, "and she fell off a bridge onto him and knocked him out."

She can picture how this would all play out in the court of social media.

On her phone. Navel-gazing. Typical!

Used to like her, but she got 2 full of herself.

Truth.

Such a bitch.

U no she thru her sister under a 🚌.

The receptionist, with the bored expression of someone who has heard this particular story a dozen times today alone, hands them a clipboard with a sheaf of paperwork. "Fill this out, and I'll need the insurance card."

Freya turns to Nathaniel, who has not said more than two words aside from emptily reassuring them that it was

all good, and she wonders if he's brain damaged.

He was a brilliant mathematician, they would say. *On the verge of curing cancer. Until she fell on him.*

Another life ruined.

Hate that bitch.

"Insurance card," the receptionist repeats. "Otherwise, I need payment up front for the appointment."

"Do you have an insurance card?" Freya asks him. But the question does not seem to register at all. "Can I see your wallet?"

He hands it to her, and she rifles through. There's the driver's license, a bit of cash, the boarding pass, some business card, and, tucked into the torn lining, a creased photo strip. She peers at the picture of what is almost certainly a much younger Nathaniel and an older man who previews what Nathaniel might look like in another ten years—maybe his father? She feels a tug from deep inside, as if there were an invisible cord looped around the area where her heart should be.

She reaches into her wallet and pulls out her own credit card. She can hear her mother, Hayden, the publicists tell her that she has just provided a paper trail of her guilt. *But I was just trying to do the right thing*, she tells her invisible judges.

What do you know about the right thing?

The receptionist hands Freya the clipboard with pages of medical forms. Her plan had been to get him here to an urgent care clinic and be on her dreary way, but now, hearing the invisible critics corner her (*You paid for him because you*

were responsible), she cannot get away so easily. Sighing heavily, she leads Nathaniel to the seats and hands him the forms. The Lurker is still there. Maybe she can get him to leave his phone lying around so she can delete whatever pictures he took before they wind up a headline in the *Post*: *Diva Ditches KO'd Pedestrian*.

Who's she kidding? She can't sing, and if she can't sing there won't be fame, let alone celebrity or even buzz, and certainly no gossip items in the *Post*. The fans will disappear. And then . . .

She blinks hard, trying to dislodge the thought, and turns to Nathaniel, who's staring at the clipboard as though it were written in hieroglyphics. At this rate, they're going to be here all day. She snatches the clipboard away from him. "How about I fill that out for you?" she says, trying her best not to let her impatience seep through.

He nods.

The name she knows: Nathaniel Haley. "Address? Date of birth?"

"I don't have one," he says, and Freya thinks that he really is addled. He's still holding his wallet, so she takes it back and removes his driver's license, copying the pertinent info from there. Six foot two. Brown hair, green eyes. Nineteen years old. The address is just a state route in Washington, but when she writes it down, she pictures a house on the edge of a forest. She hears birds singing.

"Emergency contact?" she asks.

His face goes blank.

She fishes out the business card and reads the name: Hector Fuentes. Is that the man in the photo strip? "Hector Fuentes? Is that your father?" she asks, though Nathaniel doesn't look like the kind of person who has a father named Hector Fuentes, but then again, Freya doesn't look like the kind of person who has a mother named Nancy Greenberg.

Nathaniel hesitates for a moment, shakes his head.

"Can you tell me your father's phone number?"

When he returns a blank look, she doesn't blame him. Who remembers phone numbers anymore? She can get it off that ancient flip phone he used to call his father in the park, but she's not sure how those phones work, so even though it implicates her further, she writes down her own number.

— — —

Harun listens to Freya quiz Nathaniel about allergies (shrimp). He feels left out. He wishes he had an allergy to offer. But he's not allergic to anything, except perhaps himself. This is a thing. He looked it up once. It can be fatal.

"Have you had any of the following?" Freya—he's sure it's her now, he saw the credit card—lists a number of medical conditions. They include ailments like tuberculosis, arrhythmia, and emphysema, and Harun can't help but notice that the most common maladies, the ones that will really hurt a person—corrosive shame, shattered heart, betrayed family—are not included.

She finishes the forms and turns them in. Harun knows that whatever use he might have had is expired, but she is his

last chance at getting James back. What are the odds of them meeting, on this of all days? He must find a way to extend his utility.

The nurse calls Nathaniel's name.

Freya says, "You'll be okay?"

Nathaniel begins to answer, but Harun interrupts. "We should go with him. To talk to the doctor."

Freya looks extremely unhappy about this, but, sighing, she stands and reluctantly follows.

— — —

They all three squeeze into the examination room, where, after the nurse takes Nathaniel's vital signs, it becomes immediately apparent that they are complete strangers with nothing in common and nothing to say to each other.

Awkward silence ensues as they each attempt to find some place in the small room to look that is not at one another.

Freya takes out her phone. The screen, she now sees, is cracked from the fall in the park, frozen on the image of her sister—*she said yes!*—with her stupid fiancé. The Lurker has his phone in his hand. Is he tweeting about her? Has he already posted pictures? She should check. She should tell someone. But she can't bear it. She doesn't want to know. She shuts off her screen but pretends to be busy on her phone so she can take a moment to surreptitiously size up her new companions.

The Lurker is jittery, big brown eyes popping out of brown skin a shade or two darker than hers. He exudes a sort

of nervous energy that makes him look like a frightened animal and takes away from the fact that under all those jangling nerves is a cute guy, moderately well-dressed, trying desperately to play it cool.

The other one, Nathaniel, looks like the sort of person who's never played it cool in his life. Looking like that, he wouldn't need to. He's the sort of attractive—tall and lanky and possessing bone structure people pay money for—that others need to play it cool around. Though not Freya. She has been inundated with beauty so much that she's no longer impressed by it. She would be unimpressed by Nathaniel too were it not for the mismatched eyes, one green, one grayish. They mar his perfection. They make him breathtaking.

"You're pretty enough," Hayden told her once, "but it's your voice that makes you distinctive." It follows that without a voice she is indistinctive. She is nobody.

There's a hard knock at the door as the doctor comes in. Freya scopes him out straightaway: young and toothily handsome but with a smug smile that wrecks everything.

"What seems to be the problem?" he asks.

It's the same opening the doctor used earlier that day. Why do they ask that? Can't they just read the forms? Only this time there is no Freya's mother to step into the maw with the explanation, and Nathaniel remains mute.

"We were in the park," Freya begins. "And I sort of fell off a bridge, onto Nathaniel."

"You fell off a bridge? Did you faint?"

"No," Freya says. She wonders if she should've said she

did faint, because this would make her seem less culpable. *Not her fault*, they would tweet. *She fell after fainting. Poor thing. Lost her voice, you know.* "I just lost my balance."

He wheels his stool in Freya's direction, stopping just short of her bare feet.

"Whoa!" he says as if he just noticed her feet had been amputated and she was walking on bloody nubs. "What happened?"

"To my feet? They just got dirty," Freya says.

"How?" he asks

"From dirt," the Lurker mutters under his breath, and Freya almost smiles.

The doctor turns toward the Lurker. "Are you the one she fell on?"

"No," he answers. "I'm Harun. I am a bystander."

"A Samaritan, really. Harun helped me get Nathaniel here," Freya says, relieved to have learned Harun's name in such a non-awkward way. She was taught always to use people's names. It makes them feel important. If she uses his name, maybe he won't turn the internet against her.

"Who's Nathaniel?" the doctor asks.

She points to the corner, where for someone as tall as Nathaniel is, he's doing a pretty good job of disappearing.

The doctor finally tears his gaze away from Freya and looks at the chart. "Nathaniel Haley," he reads.

"Yeah," Nathaniel says in a voice as wispy as fog.

"So you were fallen on by this one?" He gestures to Freya.

"Yeah, I guess," he says.

"Not the worst way to get knocked out," the doctor says, tossing a conspiratorial glance in Freya's direction, which she refuses to catch. She looks down, thinking: *Stop. Just stop.*

"It factor," Hayden had called it. "Y'know, that invisible thing some people got that makes others wanna get closer. You can't fake it. You either got it or you don't." Freya had it, Hayden said. Sabrina did not, Hayden said.

"And you blacked out?" the doctor asks.

Nathaniel shrugs.

"Yes, he did," Freya replies.

"I need to hear it from the patient."

Nathaniel doesn't answer. Freya begins to wonder if he really is brain damaged.

"Yes," Harun says. "He did. She fell onto him. He blacked out."

"I'd appreciate it," the doctor says in an unpleasant tone, "if you allowed me to interview the patient."

"But how can he tell you what happened when it happened to him?" Harun says. "I was there. I saw."

— — —

I saw.

Harun has no way of knowing at this moment that these words are more healing to Nathaniel than anything the doctor might do. Someone saw.

"So you lost consciousness?" the doctor asks Nathaniel again.

Nathaniel looks at Freya, at Harun, who both nod.

"Yes," he says.

"And he vomited," Harun adds. "On her shoes."

"So that's why you're barefoot!" the doctor says to Freya. "You shouldn't walk through the city like that. I'll see if we can get you some shoes from the lost and found."

"I'll be fine," she says.

"You might step on glass."

"No, really. It's all good," she says, glancing at Nathaniel with a look, like it's a private joke she's tossing at him. But he doesn't catch it. (He used to be a really good catcher, back when he played first base.) Not because he cannot but because he dares not.

This has already gone way too far. There's really no need for this.

But the doctor has pulled out a penlight and is examining Nathaniel's eyes.

"Heterochromia," he declares.

"Is that like a hematoma?" Harun asks.

"No. It's when you have different-colored eyes. Though the left pupil here is really fixed."

"You mean the pupil in my prosthetic eye?" Nathaniel asks.

"Right. Of course. You threw me with the different colors. But I like it. Is it a kind of David Bowie homage?"

"Can we get on with the exam?" Freya asks impatiently. "We don't have all day."

The doctor rolls his stool over to the computer. "Okay, Nate. I'm going to ask about symptoms, and you answer on

a scale of zero to six, zero being not a problem, three being moderate, six being severe. Got it?"

"I think so," Nathaniel replies.

"Headache?"

"Yes."

"Zero to six?"

It's a four, but he doesn't want anyone to worry. "Maybe a two."

"Pressure in the head?"

"Yeah. Maybe three."

"Blurred vision?"

"It's all good now."

"A number."

"Zero, maybe one."

The doctor goes through the list: neck pain, balance problems. Nathaniel answers in a monotone: two, three, two.

"How about sadness?" the doctor asks.

"Sadness?"

"Yeah, sadness."

"You want me to rate sadness?"

"Yep," the doctor says. "Zero to six, please, Nate."

— — —

Freya is over it. Over doctors who pretend to know everything, who act like they can fix her, who ask what's wrong without reading a chart, who ask people to sing "Happy Birthday" or to measure sadness on a scale of one to six.

"His name is Nathaniel!" she snarls with an irritated confidence she has no right to. For all she knows, he goes by Nate.

— — —

He does not. Though his father calls him Nat.

— — —

"And what does it have to do with a concussion?" Harun asks. Is this doctor even a doctor? He scans the walls for a medical school diploma.

"Hey, I don't write the checklist," the doctor says, fully out of patience. "So how about you give me a number so I can get you out of here. Sadness, one to six?"

"No, he can't give you a number," Harun says.

"You can't measure sadness in numbers," Freya agrees.

"So how would you measure it?" the doctor asks. "Please do tell, so I can refer it to the American Academy of Neurology."

— — —

The question is asked in a most scathingly sarcastic tone, but Freya, Harun, and Nathaniel all ponder it seriously.

— — —

Freya thinks of music, and then silence, and being totally alone.

— — —

Harun thinks of love, and family, and *Get the fuck out my life*.

— — —

Nathaniel thinks of his father, and Sam and Frodo, and a house being swallowed up by the forest.

— — —

They may be complete strangers, with different lives and different problems, but there in that examination room they are measuring sadness the same way. They are measuring it in loss.

THE ORDER OF LOSS
PART IV

NATHANIEL

"Nat, you gotta come see this," Dad called the minute I walked in the door.

I took a breath and pushed back against the irritation. I was sweaty from baseball practice, and I needed to shower and do Dad's breakfast and lunch dishes and get dinner going, and I needed to go online to register for a free SAT prep course.

The day before, my mother had called me, wanting to know if I'd started thinking about college. "You're going to be a junior. Has your father even started this process?"

I assured her he had, fumbling some lie about arranging to visit schools together, which is something I knew a couple of kids had done with their parents. Mom didn't press. The woman who'd once said she couldn't live with two children now had two new children and her hands were full, so I knew she wouldn't follow up. Still, I'd made an appointment with a guidance counselor and had seen her earlier that day.

"Nat, hurry up!" Dad called from the living room.

Sometimes if I ignored him, he got distracted. Most of the time, he only got more insistent, and it became that much harder to calm him down. It was better to see what had gotten him all riled up, talk to him a bit, and maybe I could get on the computer.

The guidance counselor had been surprised I hadn't been to see her before. "Your grades are pretty good, and a sophomore on the varsity baseball team is very impressive," she said. Last year, we'd made it all the way to the division finals, and since then we'd had a few scouts come to our games. "With your grades, you could get into a fine school," she'd said. "Maybe even a partial scholarship if you play baseball. Not a division one school, but somewhere smaller—if you do well on the SATs. Let's get you set up for a course."

"Nat!"

I went into the living room. The TV was on, as it usually was since Dad had stopped working. I'd learned to gauge his mood not from how he was acting but from what he was watching. Cartoons, CNN, *Real Housewives* meant he was checked out. Documentaries meant he was good. Dad loved documentaries, not because of what they told you but because of what they suggested.

I squinted at the TV. Some guy was riding a bicycle.

"Yeah?" I said.

"The guy riding the bike is blind." Dad smiled triumphantly. But I knew there was more. There was always more. "Hear that sound?"

It was faint but unmistakable, like a woodpecker.

"He's clicking," Dad said. "Like a bat."

"Echo-locating," I said.

Dad snapped his fingers. "Exactly! He's been doing that since he was little, when he lost both his eyes to cancer. He does not have eyes, but he can see—literally see."

"You can't *literally* see if you don't have eyes."

"Can't you?" Dad asked with that glimmer in his own eyes, and I sighed because I knew what that meant.

"It got me thinking," Dad continued. And then he was off to the races, his latest theory he wanted to try out. If a blind man could see with other parts of his brain, what else might we be able to do? "We put up roadblocks in our mind that limit us. But we can remove those blocks too. What was it William Blake said? 'If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.'"

His speech started to pick up speed, as it did when he really went on a tear. Soon he would be breathless, the thoughts coming too fast for him to keep up. "Do you see? Do you see?" he asked. "What if we could unlock, if we could just set our minds free?" He stopped to knock himself on his temple, not softly, to make a point, but with intensity like he wanted to punch his brain.

I gently grabbed his hand and held it in my lap until he calmed down.

"Don't you see?" Dad's voice was a reverent whisper. "What it means is that the only limitation on how we live our lives is up here." His touched my temple this time, gently. He reached for two strips of heavy cotton, cut, I saw,

from one of the few sets of intact bedsheets we still had.

"Let's go into the forest," Dad said. "Let's go see if we can't expand our consciousness."

I didn't want to expand anything. I had homework to do. An SAT prep course to register for. The day's dishes were still sitting on the table, and dinner needed to be started. But I knew if I didn't go, Dad would go without me.

He wanted to walk deep into the woods, but I managed to steer him toward a clearing not that far away, a place clear of obstacles, cliffs, large boulders. It was where, four years earlier, we had scattered Grandma Mary's ashes.

"I'll do you first," Dad said.

"Okay." I had no intention of staying blindfolded, of echolocating. I was here to make sure Dad didn't fall off a cliff.

I let Dad put the blindfold on me. He tied it tight, and the darkness was sudden and absolute. I carefully sat down on a fallen log, so Dad, who wasn't dumb, would think I was participating in this activity and not just humoring him.

At first, I felt the familiar, itchy crawl of impatience. How long would this go on? But as I sat there in the darkness, something strange began to happen. It was like someone turned up the volume of the forest. I could hear the sound of a leaf falling to the earth, of it degrading to mulch. I could hear the beavers pushing stones into the river. And then I was hearing past the forest. In the darkness, I heard a bell ringing in a far-off church. I heard an airplane flying at forty thousand feet. I heard the sound of a girl singing. I tasted flavors I could not describe. I felt transported to a place I did not know.

That was the maddening thing about my father. Just when you wanted to write him off as a nut job or a Peter Pan, he would make you go traipsing blindfolded through the forest and you would touch the hem of something mysterious, and you would be so grateful for being on this adventure with him.

"God damn it!" Dad yelped. "Shit!"

I yanked off my mask and light returned, and the secrets the forest had been ready to tell quieted themselves.

There was Dad, clicking wildly, flailing his hands, teetering toward a ditch.

"Dad!" I took off running. "Dad, wait!" I caught up with him a few feet before the ravine, but he kept going, wildly windmilling his arms around. "Dad, stop!" I reached out to yank him back, but he jerked forward, snapping a green tree branch that ricocheted back with the force of a whip.

I didn't feel pain. It was only when I felt the blood, warm and trickling down my forehead, that I knew something had happened.

"Dad," I called. "I think I'm hurt."

He didn't turn around. "You're fine," he said.

The blood was running into my mouth now, the vision in my left eye going murky.

"I'm bleeding."

"If a blind man can see, you can handle a little blood."

It was more than a little, but I knew when he was too far gone.

"Put some leaves on it," Dad said. "Who knows? Maybe

they'll have antibacterial properties like the tree frog." He'd watched a documentary about that years ago.

"Dad!"

"You can't discover things if you don't take risks. You'll be fine."

"Dad."

"Imagine if Frodo and Sam gave up every time they hit a hiccup. Imagine that."

I knew better than to argue with him when he got like this. My choice was either to go back home and take care of it or to wait out here with him.

I waited out there in the woods for at least another hour, as my father expanded his consciousness and I bled into soggy leaves. By the time we got back to the house, my eye had swollen shut. I went into the bathroom and cleaned up the cut as best I could.

When I came out, Dad was in the kitchen, cleaning up the dishes and running the garbage disposal, something he never did.

"That was life-changing, wasn't it?" he said. He glanced at me, finally noticing the wound. "You should put some ice on that."

Except there was no ice in the freezer, and it was late and I had to start dinner. So I put a washcloth on it, figuring it would get better. It had stopped hurting and was beginning to itch.

I stayed home from school the next day because I'd slept badly and I looked awful. The eye was puffy and swollen shut.

I briefly thought about going to the doctor, except we didn't have a doctor aside from the one Dad went to at the free clinic in town to get his meds. I thought of going to the ER but worried about how much it would cost and what would happen if it got back to Mom. I was getting too old for custody battles, but I couldn't be too careful.

Dad stayed locked in his room, scribbling in his notebooks. He would be like this until the fever broke, and then he'd be on to the next documentary—about serial killers, about mountain gorillas, about salt, about suicide tourism—that would click an idea in his brain and send him running again.

When I woke up the following morning, my eye was on fire, an ooze of bloody pus trickling down my cheek. I went to the nurse's office at school and was immediately sent to the ER, and it was there that the doctors said the entire socket was infected and the eyeball itself had been deprived of blood for so long the tissue was probably dead. The eyeball would likely have to be removed.

The surgery was delayed because we needed parental consent and Dad was not answering his phone. I made up a story about how he was a writer and turned off his phone when he was working. It wasn't that far from the truth.

"What about your mother?" they asked me.

My mother could not find out about this. I'd see to that just as I'd made sure she'd never found out about the week we'd gone without electricity or the time Dad had left me in the forest all night.

(*Don't tell your mother.*)

"My mom's dead," I told the doctors.

They eventually got hold of Dad and I was rushed into surgery. I woke up alone, in a dark room, and knew my eye was gone. As I lay there, groggy, my head throbbing, I wanted someone to wrap their arms around me, to kiss my forehead, to tell me things would be okay. But nobody did. Tentatively, I touched the gauze packing around my eye, and realized, with equal parts terror and relief, this secret would be impossible to conceal from my mother. Because she would see, and she would know, and if she knew, she wouldn't let me stay here. Would she?

My father came into the room, and when he saw me awake, he began to weep. "Oh, Nat. Oh, Buddy," he said. "Look at you."

At the sight of my father doubled over, sobbing, I understood that I would not tell my mother. The decision had already been made long ago, years before I lost my eye. And with that, the lie I'd told the doctors about her being dead suddenly became true. To keep this secret from her, I'd have to keep myself from her. The realization sent a bolt of fury through me, shaking off the remaining sedation. In that terrible, tiny moment, I didn't just hate my father, I wished he were dead.

But the moment passed, leaving me exhausted, and hungover with shame. I didn't hate my father. I loved him and he loved me.

He had begun sobbing convulsively, like he'd heard my

horrible thoughts. I knew if I didn't calm him down, it would only get worse. So I told him what I'd already learned people wanted to hear: "It's all good."

"But you lost your eye," he said.

"It couldn't be saved," the doctors had told me. So I saved the only thing I still could. Or I tried to.

"Maybe I had to lose the eye to gain sight," I told him.

The look on his face, it was so hopeful it was painful. "Really? You really think so?"

I didn't think so. I didn't believe half of what my Dad said anymore, but I couldn't write him off completely. Because he was occasionally right. And because he was Dad. And we were a fellowship of two.

"Really," I told him.

THE ORDER OF LOSS
PART V

FREYA

The first video really was an accident. People didn't believe that. They thought it was part of the concocted narrative, but it was the one detail of all of this that Hayden didn't invent. It just happened.

Sabrina had been right. Two years later, our father was still gone. The promises to come back, to have us visit him, turned out be made of smoke. The weekly Skype calls had begun to dwindle, and on the phone he was vague about his life. He no longer asked if I wanted to visit. He no longer asked me if I sang.

But I did still sing—only with Sabrina now. Every day. After school, Sabrina made the snacks—grilled cheese sandwiches with sliced tomatoes—and helped me with my homework. She was a far better student than me, straight As across the board. When homework was finished, we listened to music together, picking apart songs we loved, seeing if we could sing them better.

Sometimes we went online, watched videos on YouTube.

Other times, we went on Facebook, trying to get a glimpse of our father. Back when he lived here it had been his professional page, with videos of him playing gigs or offering music lessons after Mom had come up with the idea that he should teach to earn some money. These days the posts showed him at church, at family meals, smiling broadly, arms around aunts and uncles and cousins we'd never met. Did he miss us? I couldn't tell. The status updates were usually in Amharic.

That day, we were scrolling through Facebook when we came upon a picture of a woman holding a baby bundled in a green blanket. The caption read: **በመጨረሻ ወንድ ልጅ አለን.**

"Let's look it up," Sabrina said, and we pasted the words into a translation program. I thought it would say something about a new nephew, a new cousin for me, but the translator spat out: *Finally, we have a son*. And suddenly I understood why the phone calls had dwindled.

I began to cry, something I did often, which irritated Sabrina, who never cried. But this time, she patted me on the shoulder. "I'm sorry," she said.

Her pity made me cry harder. She looked at the screen. "Solomon doesn't deserve your tears." She'd stopped calling him Dad years ago. "I mean, how could he forget you like this?"

You. As if it only affected me.

"You know what you should do? You should post a song or something. Show him how amazing you are. What he's lost."

Sing what you can't say, my father had said. That was what Billie and Nina and Josephine and Gigi did.

"Okay."

"Let's clean you up first."

Sabrina mopped my face with a washcloth and carefully did my makeup. "Do you know what you want to sing?" she asked.

Yes. I wanted to sing "Tschay Hailu," the lullaby my father had sung to me and that he would now be singing to his new son. I fetched an empty trash can for accompaniment, and Sabrina hit RECORD.

My intention had been to send a greeting to my new brother, a reminder to my father, but when I started singing, something else came out, something primal and aching and pure. I kept singing, drumming even harder, and my voice went places it had never been before.

When it was over, I felt better, just like the night when Sabrina first sang with me. I didn't even want to post it. Singing the song was enough.

"Oh, we're definitely posting it." Sabrina uploaded the video onto her Facebook page.

"Huh," Sabrina said the next day when we checked on the post. She'd tagged our father, so the video had shown on his page, but he must've untagged himself because it was no longer there.

But on her own page, we saw that the video had been shared sixty-seven times. It had garnered more than a hundred comments, some from Sabrina's friends but others from people I didn't know. I was devastated that my father had untagged himself. Why would he do that? Was he em-

barrassed about us? Ashamed that he'd left us? Did he not like the video?

The only thing that eased my pain was all the comments. Later, when Mom came home and Sabrina was helping her with dinner, I read them all. Twice over. They were so nice. And they filled the hole my father's silence had left.

I took a copy of the video and clipped it down to six seconds and posted it on Twitter.

By the next day, the video had hundreds of shares, thousands of likes, and so many more comments. I read them all. And read them again. They made me feel so good.

I showed Sabrina. "Why'd you post it again?" she asked. "Solomon probably doesn't have Twitter, and he already saw it on Facebook."

"Look at how many people shared it, though."

Sabrina looked. She seemed unimpressed.

"Maybe we should show Mom?" I asked.

"Yeah," she said. "I'm sure she'll love that you sent our father a song."

"But it's weird that it got so many shares." I tried to sound casual. "It kind of went viral. We should tell her before she finds out from someone else."

Sabrina sighed. "Fine. I'll show her."

— — —

"Huh," Mom said. "I've been reading about how the internet is creating a new kind of star. There's potential for actual money."

"How?" Sabrina asked.

"I'm not sure," our mother said. "Let's post another one. Why don't you do it together this time? You girls sing so beautifully. What do you think, Sabrina?"

Even back then, there must have been a small acorn in my heart. Because I felt it, nubby and shriveled and shouting, *What about me*? when Mom said that. *I* was the one born singing. *I* was the one who'd gotten all those likes from my video. But no one asked me.

"Okay," Sabrina said. "Why not?"

— — —

The first few videos were duds. But Mom, under the thrall of *The Path*, was convinced if she dreamed it hard enough, it would happen. She began reading up on what made successful videos. She determined that we needed a hook, a look, and a sound.

The sound was mostly dictated by covers. We hadn't started writing our own material yet. The look was my doing: I wanted us to look like Billie and Josephine and Gigi. And the hook was that we were sisters who looked nothing like sisters.

"What should we call you?" Mom asked. "The Kebede Sisters?"

Sabrina wrinkled her nose. "The Sisters Kebede," she tried. She shook her head. "Sounds weird." She paused, tapping her fingers against her chin. "What about the Sisters K?"

"The Sisters K," Mom said. "I like that."

— — —

By the time we were summoned to Hayden Booth's offices four years later, the Sisters K had a YouTube channel (220,000 subscribers), an Instagram feed (780,000 followers), a Twitter account (375,000 followers), an official Facebook page and several fan pages, and a SoundCloud channel with more than twenty original songs.

We also had a manager: Mom. She watched other people's successful videos obsessively, trying to figure out what worked and what didn't. She mapped out weekly schedules, analyzed web traffic to determine when we should post. She stayed up late into the night, monitoring the comments and shares. When our videos earned the first bit of advertising money, she used it to hire a consultant to help us hone our look and leverage—or, as she said, "monetize"—our growing popularity.

"It's interesting," the publicist said, going through some of the comments. "They seem personally invested in Freya."

"Probably because she responds to all of their comments," Sabrina said dismissively. "Every. Single. One."

I blushed and looked down, embarrassed and ashamed. Because Sabrina was right. I did read every comment and I responded, in the early days, to nearly all of them. It was the only thing that made me feel like I was part of this.

Because though we called ourselves the Sisters K, it was really the Mom and Sabrina show. Sabrina and I might have sung together, and we sometimes wrote songs together, but she and Mom discussed every aspect of the business, and she went to Mom with every new song we wrote. They con-

spired. They plotted. And our family went back to being a three-legged chair.

The comments, however, were all mine. When I started replying to fans, they began addressing me directly. While Mom and Sabrina sat in front of one computer, analyzing engagements, talking about me, I could quietly open my phone and actually engage, knowing someone would be there for me.

"Actually," the publicist told us, "that's a really smart strategy. It makes the fans feel like they're a part of your success. Those kinds of superfans are the ones that'll take you from a novelty act to the next level."

"Wonderful!" Mom said. "Freya, keep doing what you're doing. Sabrina and I will keep up on our end."

— — —

We began to earn more advertising money from our videos. Mom went from full-time to part-time at her job as a hospital administrator. She read articles about the highest-paid internet celebrities. "Some of these people make millions!" She was convinced we could make some good money from this. Enough to get out of debt, pay for college, and—who knew?—maybe even get a little rich.

But Hayden Booth. Not even Mom, deep in the throes of *dream it, be it*, imagined Hayden Booth would come knocking.

When his office called to request a meeting, Mom was shaken. Almost scared. Like she'd been summoned by God.

When you read articles about Hayden Booth—which Mom did, obsessively, after he called—he was sometimes described as a music producer, other times a talent manager, other times a social media aggregator. "There wasn't a word for what I did before I came along," he bragged in one of those articles. "I just call myself a creator."

His origin story had become a thing of myth. Ten years ago he'd been a scrappy club kid from London, broke and backpacking through Berlin when he saw this girl busking on the U-Bahn. He'd listened to her sing and play guitar and seen her entire trajectory right away. It was like a vision. He didn't know how but he knew she could be huge, and he could be the one to get her there. When she finished singing, he approached her, not even knowing if she spoke English, and said, "I'm going to make you famous."

And he did.

He told us a version of that story at our first meeting, when, after having us wait for two hours in the reception area, he finally invited us into his office and sat us down on a bench that felt like concrete while he sat in his throne, backlit by the bank of windows behind him.

When he finished telling us how he'd made Lulia, and then Mélange, then Rufus Q, he said he was always on the hunt for who was next. He looked at me, eyes open and unblinking. It was terrifying. I cast my gaze around his office, in search of a safe haven—looking out the window, at the wall, at his weird graffiti art print that read: *Art is personal. Business is not*—anywhere but at Hayden.

Finally he asked: "Do you know what it means to be famous?"

Mom started to answer, but Hayden held up his hand and she went quiet. "From them."

There was a pause. Sabrina looked at me, her face uncharacteristically uncertain. "To be known for what you do?" Sabrina said at the same time I said, "To be loved."

"My CPA is known for having creative ways of hiding money from the IRS. Is he famous?" he asked Sabrina.

Sabrina shook her head.

"And my granny was beloved. But I bet you've never heard of Pauline Howarth, have you?" he asked my mother.

She shook her head.

"Most people don't know what fame is. They confuse fame with celebrity, celebrity with buzz. But I'm going to tell you how it works." He said this like he was divulging a secret.

He stood up and stalked around the desk, leaning on the edge of it closest to Sabrina. "First, you've got buzz." He cupped his left hand into the shape of a *C*. "You girls already have that. But buzz is cheap. It's your fifteen minutes of fame. It's what a daft woman in a Chewbacca suit gets. It comes and it goes. Unless . . ." Here he cupped his other hand into a *C*. "Buzz sustains enough to become celebrity. Which lasts a bit longer, but it's still built on quicksand. Now, if celebrity can be translated into commodity, you're onto something. You can dine out on that. Sports stars. B-list actors. Second-rate musicians get this far, an endless loop of buzz, celebrity, commodity."

Here he joined his two hands together so they made a circle, the fingers not quite touching. "You can ride that train pretty far, make a living that way, but it's still not fame." He paused. His fingers began to flutter, like wings of a bird wanting to take flight. "Mum here has done a bang-up job getting you girls this far. You two might even make some good money for a while, get some decent endorsements and revenue, but I promise you this: it won't last more than a few months or, if you're really lucky, years. But sooner or later—probably sooner—people will be onto the next shiny thing, and it won't be you. When that happens, your fans will forget you. Your numbers will drop. And you'll go back to being like everyone else."

"So how do we keep that from happening?" Mom asked.

"That brings us to fame," Hayden said, ignoring her. "Sometimes, if you're talented, if you have that something extra, and if you're surrounded by the right people, you stand a shot at breaking out of that loop. Out of celebrity, which is ephemeral . . ." Here he exploded his hands wide open, his bird fingers soaring to the heavens. "And into fame, which is eternal."

Hayden's phone began to ring, rattling on the desk. The screen flashed Lulia, as if the universe wanted to confirm what Hayden had said.

"Fame," Hayden continued. "That's what I do. I create fame. But only under the right circumstances, with the right artists. Those who are talented enough. And hungry

enough." Here he stopped to look at me again. "The question is: Are you hungry enough?"

I had no idea if I was hungry enough, what that even meant, what he was promising. But I had understood one thing. *Your numbers will drop. Your fans will forget you.* I knew what that meant.

"Are you hungry enough?" Hayden repeated.

Mom and Sabrina spoke as one, answering, as they always did, for me. "We are," they said.

THE ORDER OF LOSS
PART VI

HARUN

I found James because of a dollar bill and lost him because of a fifty. Which is oversimplifying, but how else do you explain something as inexplicable as love?

"Yo. You drop this?" I looked up. There was James, holding up a crumpled dollar bill.

"I don't think so," I stammered. It was my first week at the community college, and though the campus was small and in the city where I'd spent all my life, I was lost. Clutching my schedule and map, I was trying to find the building my statistics class would be held in.

I looked up from my printed schedule and saw his face for the first time. Everything about him seemed to suggest warmth: the glow of his dark skin, the goatee that made him look like he wore a permanent smile, the brown eyes, twinkling, like he was in on the best joke.

"Where you need to be?" he asked me.

And I had the strangest thought: *Right here is where I need to be.*

James grabbed the schedule. "You're at Newkirk. You need building G, on the other side of Bergen. Lemme show you," he said and took me by my elbow, which subsequently caught fire.

I paid no attention in statistics that day. I just rubbed my still-tingling elbow and thought of the boy with the laughing eyes whose name I did not even catch and whom I would likely never see again. So when I came out of the building and saw him leaning against the bike racks, my first thought was that it was a miracle. Then I remembered it couldn't possibly be that. But when he asked me if I wanted to grab a coffee, it did seem like some sort of divine intervention.

We talked for two hours straight, pausing only to breathe. James told me he was in his second year of school, studying food management in hopes of becoming a chef. He watched cooking shows obsessively, and could take any five ingredients and turn them into something delicious. He was an only child, raised by his mom, until one weekend she dropped him off with his father and never came back. He'd recently moved out of his father's house, and was now crashing with a cousin in the Heights while he figured things out.

I told James that I was studying business and accounting in hopes of one day taking over—or, if Ammi had anything to say about it, expanding—my parents' auto supply business. I told him how Abu had gotten a green card from the lottery when he was nineteen, arriving at JFK with one suitcase. For ten years, he worked three jobs, sometimes twenty-hour days, sending money home each month and saving what he

could until he had enough to buy a business. Only then did he go back home to find a wife.

I told him about Ammi, moving to a strange land to marry a man she'd met twice, arriving in winter, and feeling assaulted by the cold. She had cried every day and hadn't left the house until she saw the first crocus, at which point she'd walked to Abu's store and asked him to give her something to do. He'd taught her to do his accounting and now she did it for so many businesses she had to turn down work. Abu sometimes joked that it was a good thing they were married otherwise she'd have no time for his books.

At six, Ammi texted, wanting to know where I was. James and I exchanged phone numbers, and the rest of the week, we kept up the conversation via texts.

"Who're you texting?" Halima asked.

The lie flew out automatically. "Jabir."

"Is that a new friend from school?" Ammi asked.

"Yes," I said. That night, I changed James's name in my contacts to Jabir and starting texting him on Snapchat to leave less of a trace.

We met for coffee again, at my suggestion, away from campus, in one of those expensive cafés on the walking mall.

"You seeing anyone?" James asked me casually.

"Not at the moment," I said.

"Not at the moment?" he repeated, a teasing drawl, as if he already knew the truth.

"I've never . . . seen anyone," I admitted. "I've never done anything . . . with anyone."

For a second, I was scared he'd laugh at me, or reject me, but he just ran his finger across the rim of his coffee mug, nodding, as if it all made sense to him, as if *I* made sense to him.

"I take it you're not out to your family?" he asked.

"I'm not out to anyone."

"'Cept me."

The revelation stunned me, but in a good way, like I'd been a can of soda on a shelf, all quiet and dusty until someone had come along and shaken me. For the first time in my life, someone else knew who I was. The realization left me giddy, light-headed, drunk (or what I imagined drunk to be like).

"Except you," I told James.

James smiled and licked his lips. "Seeing as you told me a secret, I guess I owe you one back."

"You already told me about that singer you're obsessed with."

"Freya." He shook his head. "Nah. Not her." He cast his eyes downward, a little creep of red at his sideburns. He was embarrassed. I was a goner. "You didn't drop that dollar bill." He paused. "I did."

"You did? Why?"

His eyes were slow and sleepy, coming up to greet mine like a morning sunrise. "To meet you."

And with that, the can was shaken even harder, and the fizzy sensation grew more powerful than it had been that night with Aladdin, more powerful than it had been with all

the crushes on boys real and make-believe whom I'd fantasized about over the years but never really allowed myself to imagine being with.

"Got another secret for you," James said. He leaned across the table and beckoned me closer. His mouth was near my ear, his finger was on the tab. If he opened that can, there would be no going back.

"What?" I asked. Entire body liquid.

"I'm gonna kiss you now," he whispered.

— — —

"I thought March was supposed to be in like a lion, out like a lamb," James muttered that frigid day a year and a half later. "And it's almost April. Ain't supposed to be this cold."

James wasn't living in Jersey anymore, not going to school anymore, which was why we'd taken to meeting Thursdays in the city. He complained that one day a week wasn't enough, and I didn't like it either, but some days we were together twelve hours and I justified that, amortized over a week, it wasn't that bad.

James hated the cold in general, but particularly on our Thursdays, when it was a stinging reminder that we had no place to go. He'd been kicked out of his father's place before I met him and had been bouncing from friend to relative ever since, first in the Heights, later on the Grand Concourse, and now in Inwood with a sympathetic aunt who mostly worked nights. "Come spend a night," he wheedled. I wanted to. But I couldn't.

"You could if you told your family," James said.

"And how did that work out for you?"

It was a low blow—I'd since learned that the reason James didn't live with his father anymore was that his father kicked him out after James told him he was gay —but it illustrated my point. And for this reason, it usually shut James up.

When it was cold outside, we'd meet and go to a café, station ourselves there for hours and dream about being somewhere else. "One day, we'll go to Brazil. Or to Fiji," James would say. He'd seen pictures of tree houses in the Amazon, Fijian bungalows perched right over water as blue as a swimming pool. He'd pull up the images on his phone and show me. "You'll be a pilot and fly us everywhere we want to go," he said, even though James knew I'd long since put away my dreams of being a pilot, long since stopped plane-watching.

Sometimes I tried to picture us hiking through the rain forests, diving into that impossibly blue water, but it was like trying to read a book in a dream: I could never quite see it.

That cold spring day, Fiji seemed farther away than ever. I steered James toward the nearest Starbucks, knowing a hot chocolate and a warm corner were the best we could .

But he didn't want to go there. He didn't want to go anywhere. "I'm tired of this," he muttered.

Tired of this was a fist to the gut. *Tired of this* really meant tired of me.

"Is it because I'm black?" James asked. "Christian? Can't do nothing about black, but I could convert. I had an uncle who was Nation of Islam for a while."

It took me a moment to understand what he was saying. That he thought his not being a Muslim was the deal breaker with my family.

"That wouldn't help."

"At least I'm willing to try," he said.

"You think they'd invite you for dinner? Be happy for us to have sleepovers?" I shook my head, angry. "My mother didn't speak to my brother for six months after he married a white *woman*."

"So you just gonna keep doing like this? Keep lying to them, and to yourself, because you're too chickenshit to be true?"

"How am I lying to myself?"

"Everything you do is to keep playing the good, dutiful son, and it's all bullshit." He stopped and looked at me with a withering disgust. "Did you ever even tell your parents you wanted to be a pilot?"

"What does that have to do with anything? All little kids have things they want to be when they grow up. Abdullah wanted to be Bob the Builder! Halima wanted to be a Disney princess. It doesn't mean that's what you're going to do. And anyway, it's not like any American carrier would be eager to hire a pilot named Harun Siddiqui."

"See!" James said, jabbing me with his delicate finger. "That's just it. You write people off without giving them a chance."

"No," I said. "I live in reality."

James grunted and walked ahead of me. He abruptly

stopped, which I thought meant he was ready to make up. He never could stay angry long. But he stooped down and picked something up. It was a fifty-dollar bill.

My first thought was that he'd done it on purpose, but I knew James did not have spare fifties lying around. And I could tell by the surprised smile on his face that he hadn't dropped it. He'd found it.

"We should see if someone lost it," I said.

"And let someone else take it?" He shook his head. "Aww, hell no."

"It's stealing," I said.

"It ain't stealing. It's finding. Anyone mighta dropped it, but *we* found it."

"It's still wrong."

"Think of it as a gift from God."

"You don't believe in God," I said.

"Nah, boo. You're the one who don't believe in God."

"Why would you say that?"

"Because you got no faith."

I didn't know *what* to do with that.

"Got any cash on you?" he asked.

I had twenty and some change. James started tapping away on his phone. "Between us we got almost ninety. There's gotta be some cheap-ass hotel that rents rooms for that much." He tapped some more on his phone, and then his face broke out into that wide-toothed smile. "Place near Penn Station, says it's only ninety-three a night."

"We don't have ninety-three."

"Close though. Come on."

We walked to the hotel, the wind, gritty and mean, pushing back against us.

The hotel clerk told us the room was actually $125 a night, plus tax, but if we paid cash and left by the end of his shift and didn't use the towels, we could have it for eighty.

We rode the elevator to the ninth floor. James was shaking when we unlocked the door, but he said it was on account of the cold, and the first thing he did was crank up the thermostat.

The room was ugly and dark, with a window that looked out onto an air shaft. When I imagined us being some place together, it didn't look like this. Or like the tropical waters in Fiji. It looked like my house, my bed.

That was *my* running-away fantasy. To be able to sleep like spoons in my bed at home, with James, not hiding. But that seemed so much further away than the Fijian bungalow.

We sat on opposite ends of the bed. We'd wanted this for so long, a place to be together, and now we had it and didn't know what to do.

It wasn't like we hadn't had sex. In the hidden corners of Central Park, in the empty ladies' lounge on the top floor of one of the city's old, failing department stores, we had explored the hidden reaches of each other's bodies. But those encounters were, by necessity, always fast and furtive: shirts yanked up, zippers yanked down, the important bits exposed but always both of us ready to make a break for it.

In truth, I was that way with James: always ready to make a break for it.

But here, in this room, with the thermostat cranked, we could take our time. Tentatively, we started to kiss, giggling nervously. We kicked off our shoes. We kissed some more, a little steadier, and peeled off our shirts. We went slow, even though it was agonizing, because for once, we could.

By taking our time, I saw things I'd never seen. A rigid scar on his left shoulder. The way the skin of his belly was a different color from the rest of him, more like my tone than his. His feet, the toes all the same length.

"My mom used to call them my ballerina feet," he said when I commented on them.

"You never talk about your mom."

"Nothing to say."

"Did you love her?"

"What kind of question is that? Course I loved her." He paused to bite his thumbnail. "And I know she loved me, but sometimes that ain't enough."

"You always tell me that love is all you need," I said.

"Maybe I should start living in reality, too," he replied.

I got that bad feeling again.

"I love you," I told him. "You know that, right?"

"But not enough to do something about it. Not enough to risk anything. I told my pops. I didn't think about the consequences."

"That's not fair," I replied. "You told your father before

we met. And, I might remind you, he kicked you out."

"'I might remind you,'" he mimicked. "Like I could forget. And I told my pops knowing that one day I'd meet someone like you and when it happened I'd be ready."

The heater ticked off. The room went cold. I knew what he meant, or what he thought he meant. He told his father to make a place for me. But all I heard in that *someone like you* was someone other than me.

"Nothin's gonna change if you're not willing to change it," he said. "And if you aren't, we're gonna keep hiding out, paying off clerks for five hours in a hotel."

"Four hours now," I said. "And this was your idea."

"Fine. You wanna fuck?" He unzipped his pants, tugged on mine.

At that moment, I wanted the chill in the room to go away. I wanted the distance between us to shrink. I wanted to buy a few more minutes of borrowed time. So I told him yes, I did want to fuck.

He lunged for me, and I lunged for him. I didn't know if we were fighting or apologizing, declaring our love or saying goodbye, fucking or making love.

Maybe all of those.

After, we fell asleep curled into each other, like spoons.

I woke up, my phone lighting up with calls. It was Ammi. It was after six. I was meant to be home.

I left James in that hotel room, ran to the Path, and ran home. I tried to imagine what it would be like to tell my parents. But it was like the Fijian bungalow; it existed some-

where out there in the world, but nowhere I could ever get to.

I got home late, concocting some lie to Ammi about losing track of time while studying for a big exam, and braced myself, as I did every Thursday, for the moment when Ammi would see through my lie with that radar of hers that allowed her to find a missing five dollars in her clients' books, to sniff out any remotely fishy business in their ledgers. But it never happened. She believed me because, unlike the people whose books she did, she trusted me.

I pushed the food around my plate, making another excuse about how we'd had pizza during the study session. She frowned but took my plate, and I ran to the shower to rinse James off my skin.

In my bedroom, I checked my phone but there was no text from James. I was logging onto the computer to see if he'd sent me a Facebook message when Abu popped his head in. I quickly minimized the screen.

"Everything okay?" he asked.

For the millionth time, I tried to imagine what it would be like to tell him. *I am in love,* I could say. *His name is James.*

"Can I ask you something?"

"You can ask me anything."

"Why did Ammi get so angry when Saif married Leesa?"

"That woman does not always make it so easy."

"I know, but Ammi was angry before she even met her."

Abu sighed and came to sit down on the edge of Abdullah's bed. "You must understand, Beta," he told me. "Your mother left her family behind to move to America. And sometimes

she feels like America is making strangers of her children." He paused and smiled. "Why? Have you met a girl?"

I am in love. His name is James.

"No," I said, for once telling the truth.

Facebook pinged with a message and my heart surged with the thought of talking to James. "I should get back to my work."

The message was not from James but from my cousin Amir. We had not seen each other since that time he came to America, but over the past few years we had reconnected online.

"How are you doing, cousin?" read the message.

"Not so good," I wrote.

He was online, even though it was five in the morning there. I saw the dots as he typed. "Tell me what is wrong. *Inshallah*, I can help."

The words I could not confess to my father rose up in me, desperate for an audience, and my cousin, ten thousand miles away, the seed of it all, seemed not only safe but like *qismat*, like fate.