

**THERE IS  
A DOOR  
IN THIS  
DARKNESS**



Frankie used to make the world shine, or at least that's how Wilhelmina Hart remembered it.

Frankie, Esther, and Aunt Margaret—the aunts, as Wilhelmina's father called them—lived together in the country. Aunt Margaret was her father's actual aunt and Frankie and Esther were Margaret's companions. Wilhelmina used to spend her summers with them. Wilhelmina would wake in her attic room, patter down the stairs to the smell of coffee or French toast. Step out into the yard with the grass cool on her feet; join Frankie in her garden. Wilhelmina's memories of those summers were golden; the sun always infused them with a wash of warm light.

Most days, Aunt Margaret and Esther went to work and Wilhelmina stayed home with Frankie. Frankie grew things, digging into the cold earth with strong hands, humming and praying, guiding the magic that brought forth flowers, vegetables, and herbs. "Every year is full of endings and beginnings," she told Wilhelmina. In the giant, wild yard of that castle of a house, she taught Wilhelmina the difference between a maple and an oak tree, a sycamore and a beech; a blue spruce and a hemlock; an acorn that grew into a red oak versus one that grew into a white oak. At the end of every summer, when Wilhelmina returned to her life in the city, she forgot the lessons, but she never forgot the feeling of Frankie teaching her. Frankie would come back to her in dreams, small, tanned, and sunlit, kneeling in the dirt with her silver hair tangled and stuck against her damp neck. Teaching Wilhelmina

the names of herbs in English, then sometimes in Italian; telling her which ones would soothe Wilhelmina's nerves, ease her joints, wake her up when she was sleepy.

Frankie had ovarian cancer. She had always had ovarian cancer, or anyway, "always" from the perspective of Wilhelmina, who was five, then seven, eleven, thirteen, fifteen. Frankie was one of those people who lived with cancer longer than her doctors could account for.

The aunts wanted Wilhelmina to come stay with them for more than a summer—for a whole year—when she was older, take a year to live with them, so that they could teach her all their best lessons and she could teach them her own. The aunts were like that, especially Frankie. They didn't think that just because Wilhelmina was young, she had nothing to teach. Wilhelmina looked ahead to that long, golden year. She liked that her life was a string of lights, one for every summer she'd spent with them, leading to a warm, kind sun she hadn't lived yet.

And so, when Frankie died, Wilhelmina wasn't expecting it. Why would she? For Wilhelmina, Frankie's cancer was something Frankie lived with. Like Esther's arthritis. Like her own mother's seasonal allergies. Not some bad magic that could actually suck away her life.

The dreams ended when Frankie died, and the lights went out. For one brief, horrible stretch, the sun itself seemed to have fallen into a void, Wilhelmina dragged in with it. It was cold in there, and Wilhelmina was alone. There was an inertia too: once in there, staying alone hurt less than reaching for her friends; keeping still hurt less than moving. It took Wilhelmina a long time to realize she would rather try to claw her way out.

It was around then, while Wilhelmina was just beginning to reach her hands up, that lights began to turn off all around the world.

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 30, 2020

On the Friday eight days before Wilhelmina stepped into her own, she drove Aunt Margaret into Cambridge, to an eye appointment in Harvard Square.

This was more difficult than usual, because it was snowing. In October! Big, wet, clumpy snow. And it had been so many months since Wilhelmina had driven in snow, and so much had happened since then, that she forgot all the things you needed to do. She didn't clean the snow off the side mirrors. She didn't clean the hood or the back. She didn't clean the windshield wipers adequately, so they flung chunks of snow all around while she drove.

"So beautiful," Aunt Margaret kept saying. "So beautiful!" As she peeked through the foggy windows with her foggy vision, she said, "Wilhelmina, dear, isn't it beautiful?"

Wilhelmina was listening for the ding that would herald an important text from Julie while also looking for parking where Aunt Margaret could step into the narrow streets without landing in a snowbank. She did not find it beautiful. "Okay," she said, taking her best guess at where the white lines were and bringing the car to a halt. "What do you need to do to check in?"

"Oh, I'll just give them a call," said Aunt Margaret. "You go ahead and start your errands."

"I don't want to leave you here alone," said Wilhelmina. "What if they're not ready for you?"

"I would rather wait here in this beautiful storm than in their waiting

room anyway. Go, Wilhelmina,” said Aunt Margaret. “Give an old lady a few minutes to herself. Do you know how rarely I get a minute to myself?”

Aunt Margaret was having retinal surgery. No unnecessary humans were allowed to accompany her into the building due to Covid pandemic protocols. It was enough of an impertinence sending her out into Harvard Square to have surgery all alone without first abandoning her in the car, but on the other hand, Wilhelmina didn’t begrudge her a moment to herself. Aunt Margaret and Esther had moved from their house in rural Pennsylvania to stay with Wilhelmina’s family during the pandemic. Wilhelmina; her parents; her ten-year-old sister, Delia; her four-year-old brother, Philip; and the aunts were all living together these days, in an apartment too small for seven people.

She groped around inside her coat until her fingers touched the duplicate car key beside her phone.

“Okay,” she said. “Keep the heat on, and take this when you go. I have another key.”

“All right.”

“Do you need anything?”

“I have everything I need, dear. Remember to enjoy being out in that storm.”

“When they tell you how long it’ll be, will you call me? I don’t want to keep you waiting.”

“You have grown into such a responsible young woman, Wilhelmina,” said Aunt Margaret, gazing at Wilhelmina with an expression of unruffled benevolence.

“Thanks,” said Wilhelmina. Then she pushed herself out into the snow, obscurely guilty about what a relief it was to escape.

WILHELMINA PRESSED HER WAY THROUGH a sloppy, wet world, unable to see where she was going, because her mask fogged her glasses. She wondered if her phone was too deeply buried inside her

layers to be heard or felt. Julie was supposed to be in Harvard Square today, and Wilhelmina would not be okay with missing her. She unearthed the phone, held it in her hand, and tried to see through the mostly transparent top edge of her glasses.

Glasses were, in fact, the nature of Wilhelmina's first errand: she was picking up a new prescription for herself. She hadn't expected it to feel like Shackleton forging a path to the South Pole. When the glasses-store person finally let her in and locked the door behind her, she was a cold, wet, dripping, foggy, despairing grouch with a tickling nose.

And then of course, she wasn't allowed to touch anything in the store except for her new glasses. And when she put them on, they distorted her depth perception and made her dizzy, as new glasses always do. Not to mention that she couldn't tell how they looked on her face, because she wasn't allowed to take off her mask.

The glasses-store person tucked the glasses into a cute black bag with red ribbon handles and released Wilhelmina again into the storm. The path to her next errand took her past the car. The engine was still running.

With a sigh, Wilhelmina climbed back in, pulling her mask down. Aunt Margaret watched her with a sweet, expectant smile.

"Still waiting?" said Wilhelmina.

"I just now got permission to go up," said Aunt Margaret. "But can I see your glasses first?"

Obediently, Wilhelmina unearthed her new case from the bag and handed it over.

"Oh, Wilhelmina!" said Aunt Margaret, opening the case to reveal chunky red frames. "These are you exactly." She removed the glasses and slid them onto her nose. "What do you think?"

Now that Wilhelmina could see the glasses on Aunt Margaret's face, she realized she'd made a mistake. Aunt Margaret was pinkish-pale,

small, and plump, with hardly any wrinkles. Her hair, wavy and pure white, hung loosely down her back. Her winter coat was pale green. She had a Mrs. Claus look, and Wilhelmina's red glasses were gigantic on her face.

*They're Christmas glasses*, Wilhelmina thought, despising them. *I got myself Christmas glasses*. "You look great," she said, her voice all wrong.

But Aunt Margaret only smiled serenely. "They'll suit you as they could never suit me," she said, handing them back. "All right, wish me luck, dear. They said it should be two hours."

Two hours! The most recent estimate Wilhelmina had heard had been thirty minutes. More time with Julie, then? Maybe they could have a snowy walk in the cemetery? She was so focused on wiping away the moisture she'd just discovered on her phone that, as Aunt Margaret swung the door open and climbed out into the storm, she forgot all the things she'd meant to say. *Are you nervous? It'll be fine. I've heard only good things about this doctor. Call if you need me. I'm here*. As the car door slammed and Aunt Margaret shuffled away, Wilhelmina tried to reach after her with those kinder thoughts.

ALONE IN THE CAR with her phone in her lap, Wilhelmina turned off the engine. For a while, she just sat. The snow blanketing the windshield transformed the car's interior into a white cave. She liked it, despite herself. A part of her wished she could stay just like this, alone in a bright white car, for the rest of time.

Eventually, she pulled her mask, scarf, and hat away. Then she tried the new glasses on in the rearview mirror.

The burst of pleasure surprised her. The chunky red frames looked just right on her big, pretty, pale face, her gray eyes standing out against the red rectangles, her dark hair clipped close. They weren't Christmas glasses at all.

*You'll be okay, Aunt Margaret*, she thought again, knowing that her



aunt was heading into surgery, and was not, in fact, particularly nervous. Aunt Margaret wasn't the type to get ruffled.

Wilhelmina had more errands she could do. Less despondent now, she wound herself up into her winter things again, opened the door, and pushed herself out into the snow.

WILHELMINA WASN'T TALL, but she was always steady. She had strong, steady legs and big, steady Hart feet. She always pictured her steady great-great-grandmothers climbing rocky crags in Ireland, looking out over the sea, in search of their husbands and brothers coming in with the catch. She had no idea if her ancestors had fished, or even lived near the sea, but she liked the image. She thought she might like to climb some rocky crags someday. Her boots made big, slushy footprints on the sidewalk as she advanced toward the clock shop.

When she got there, the clock man let her in, took the clock she handed him, then disappeared with it into the back. It was a small enamel clock in the shape of a barn owl, belonging to Aunt Margaret and Esther, who'd lost the key needed to wind it up. Wilhelmina had heard their sad voices behind the door of her young siblings' bedroom, which had become the aunts' bedroom when they'd moved in. She'd heard them groaning as they knelt to look under the bed, sighing when the key wasn't found. With a familiar sinking feeling, she'd knocked on their door. Wilhelmina had no school, no job, no plans, and no purpose. "There's a clock shop in Harvard Square," she'd said. "Want me to get you a new key?"

"Oh, Wilhelmina," Aunt Margaret had said. "You're an angel."

In the foyer of the clock shop, her phone finally dinged.

*We're here*, wrote Julie. *You here?*

*We?* responded Wilhelmina.

*Yeah, we've even got the kids*, texted Julie. *And we can't stay long. Sorry. We're in the alley near the post office*

“We” meant four people: Julie, Bee, and both of their little sisters. Wilhelmina had thought she was getting Julie to herself. *Five minutes*, she responded, just as the clock man emerged from the back and said gruffly, “Three hours.”

Wilhelmina was dismayed. “Three?”

“Three,” the man said firmly, peering down at her through tortoiseshell glasses. “I have several jobs ahead of yours, and I’m all alone.” He wore a pin-striped mask that matched his bow tie, a dark gray vest with silver buttons, and a crisp white shirt. She respected his style, but he’d just complicated her afternoon further. Now she would have to wait for Aunt Margaret, drive her aunt home to Watertown, then drive back for the clock.

“All right. Thank you,” said Wilhelmina dismally.

His eyebrows forming a V, the man strode around the counter and pushed the door open. She would’ve liked a minute to organize her snotty, dripping self before she set out again, but she guessed he was eager to be the only human breathing air in the shop during a pandemic.

Wilhelmina made her way to the alley near the post office, struggling to see where she was going. She heard the kids first—Julie’s seven-year-old sister, Tina, and Bee’s seven-year-old sister, Kimmy, chasing each other, throwing snow and screeching. Then she saw Julie and Bee, the two loves of her life, huddled together in winter coats and gloves over steaming cups of coffee, and needed a minute to battle her jealousy back. Her two best friends were in a quarantine bubble together so that their little sisters could attend second grade jointly. It was the new, pandemical shape of her life: a tight-knit group of four that included Julie, Bee, and two seven-year-olds, then Wilhelmina off to the side. It was like when you poured M&M’s into your hand and one of them bounced away and rolled under the couch, where it moldered eternally, living a pointless existence. Bee was Wilhelmina’s oldest friend. She’d

known him since preschool. Julie had graduated high school virtually with Wilhelmina last year and lived in the apartment above hers. Once, Julie and Wilhelmina would've been the pair texting Bee to tell him where they were going. Not anymore.

*They look like a couple*, Wilhelmina thought as she approached them. It was true, they had a couple vibe, practically leaning against each other, their faces—their beautiful, uncovered faces—flashing grins at each other whenever they pulled their masks down to sip their coffees. She could tell they'd done their makeup together. Above Julie's dark eyes, a green sparkle of eyeshadow blended into gold, and Bee had mascara-thick lashes and beautifully smudged silver eyeshadow. He also sported a wedge of pale pink near the front of his otherwise dark head of hair, which meant that someone had bleached the hell out of it for him. And given him a haircut. Wilhelmina wasn't even allowed to touch them, or even stand beside them, but apparently Julie was up to her elbows in Bee's hair.

*Not their fault*, she told herself. *Let it go, Wilhelmina. Channel your inner Elsa.*

"Hey, elephant," said Julie as she arrived.

"Hey, elephants," said Wilhelmina. It had long been their traditional greeting when they were alone.

"Great glasses," said Julie.

"Yeah, the red is you, Wil," said Bee.

"Thanks," said Wilhelmina. "You guys look amazing. What's up?"

"Fortune teller's having a snowstorm sale," said Bee, nodding at a person sitting at a folding table nearby. "I'm trying to decide if I have a question."

Wilhelmina studied the alleged fortune teller, whose folding table was situated against a brick wall spotted with snow. The sign hanging from her table said ASK MADAME VOLARA, but she was bundled in so much winter gear that she could've been anyone. Instead of a mask, she

wore purple scarves wrapped around her face, and aviator goggles. A year ago, Wilhelmina would've thought this strange. Now she just figured the woman didn't want anyone breathing germs into her eyeballs.

A smaller sign on Madame Volara's table said FORTUNES \$20. TODAY ONLY: \$5, SNOWSTORM SALE!

"Steep discount," said Wilhelmina.

"Exactly," said Bee. "I feel like it's too risky to pass it up."

"Are you kidding me right now?" said Julie. "Are you, like, completely unaware of manipulative advertising techniques?"

"Seriously, Bee," said Wilhelmina. "It could be Mr. Rochester in there, for all we know."

Julie hooted, which made Wilhelmina warm up inside.

"That was a book reference," said Bee intelligently.

"Aw, elephant," said Julie, reaching up to pat his shoulder. Bee was tall. He was also a year younger than Wilhelmina and Julie, and thus accustomed to their literary condescension.

"Okay, I have my question," he said, taking a step toward Madame Volara, who sat before a lavender crystal ball into which she might have been gazing, though it was hard to tell under all her wrappings. At any rate, she straightened as Bee approached, and raised her hands in a welcoming manner.

"Greetings," she intoned. "Ask me what you will."

"Okay," said Bee. "Will I get a soccer scholarship?" Bee was a senior, currently in virtual school, working on his college applications.

Madame Volara gazed into her milky crystal ball, then began to undulate her arms like a cartoon octopus.

"Wow," said Julie, taken aback.

"Wow!" screeched Julie's seven-year-old sister, Tina, who came running past with Kimmy in close pursuit. Kimmy threw a snowball. Tina swung at it with the thing Tina was always holding, her favorite pandemic tool: a long stick with a grabby claw at the end. Her grabby stick

decimated the snowball, and her momentum spun her in a circle, her stick drawing a hard, sharp circumference in the air.

“Oh my god, Tina,” said Julie. “If you hit someone with that thing, I’m never taking you anywhere again.”

“There’s no one around!” shouted Tina.

“Kimmy!” said Bee to his sibling. “No more snowball baseball.”

“You’re not *Mom*,” said Kimmy.

“I’m Mom’s deputy,” said Bee.

Madame Volara made a dramatic arms-above-her-head gesture that drew everyone’s attention. Then she spoke.

“I see a spotted sphere,” she said. “I see a tall, white boy with pink hair and fabulous makeup running across a grassy field, pursued by rivals who fall away in the wake of his impressive speed.”

“He’s the *goalie*,” Tina shouted.

“Teeny!” said Julie. “No being mean.”

“Don’t call me that!” said Tina. “Anyway, it’s *mean* to lie to your *customers* about the *future*.”

“Teeny!” cried Julie, grabbing Tina’s arm and trying to drag her away.

“Okay, I have a question,” said Wilhelmina, who didn’t really, nor did she want to lose five dollars. But she needed to help Julie, whose anguish felt spiky and panicked, and awfully sudden. “Um,” she said, grasping for a question.

“Ask her when we’ll go back to *school*,” shouted Bee’s little sister, Kimmy.

“Ask her who’s going to win the *election*,” shouted Tina. “An old white man? Or an old orange man?”

“Ask her, will Santa be able to come for Christmas?” shouted Kimmy.

“Um,” said Wilhelmina, “okay. What’s going to happen tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow!” Madame Volara intoned, beginning her arm-waving routine again. “Tomorrow, superheroes will roam the streets of your town.”

“They will?” said Wilhelmina, surprised.

“Tomorrow’s *Halloween*,” shouted Tina.

“Oh, right,” said Wilhelmina, disappointed. She’d liked the notion of wandering superheroes. The world needed them right now.

“Also,” said Madame Volara, then stopped, making a small, choked noise.

“Yes?” said Wilhelmina, taking a step forward. “Are you okay?”

The fortune teller sat up, ramrod straight. She threw her shoulders back and lifted her chin, and suddenly she seemed bigger. In fact, she seemed to be expanding, which was really weird, and she was also getting brighter at the edges. She looked like the sun in eclipse, and then, even though she was wearing scarves and goggles, Wilhelmina could see her face. It took form through the fabric and leather: flat cheeks and beaky nose, tufted ears and round eyes, made of flowers and leaves and shining light. Her raised arms took the shape of gigantic, feathery wings. Wings!

“AAAK!” cried Wilhelmina, a garbled, inarticulate shriek, as she backed across the alley as far as she could go. She pressed her body against the opposite building’s cold, wet stone, watching the woman grow.

“YOUR DOUGHNUT WILL BE STALE!” cried Madame Volara, in a voice like wings beating against the wind. “YOUR . . . DOUGHNUT . . . *WILL BE STALE!*” She was standing now, towering, enormous, and above her, lights were glittering. Flashes of white and gold. The lights were forming letters. *W . . . I . . . L . . .* Then a dash. *H . . . E . . . L . . . M . . .* Then another dash. *I . . . N . . . A . . .* Wilhelmina watched her own name, oddly divided, glitter in the air above the enormous fortuneteller. *WIL—HELM—INA!!*

Then the lights subsided. Madame Volara sat down. She was small again, masked, goggled, and ever-so-slightly shivering. All the noises in the alley were normal. In fact, everything in the alley was normal,

except for Wilhelmina, who was pressed against the far wall, gasping and shaking.

“Wil?” said Bee, who stood closer to Wilhelmina than he should, really—both Bee and Julie were huddling around her closer than they should, their eyes wide, their hands reaching toward her uselessly. Tina and Kimmy stood behind their older siblings, looking a bit frightened.

“Wil!” said Julie. “Are you okay? Are you having a panic attack?”

“I . . .” said Wilhelmina. “I . . . no! What do you mean? Didn’t you see that?”

“See what?” said Bee.

“The fortune teller!” said Wilhelmina. “Turn into a big bird and start glowing! The lights with my name! The prophecy!”

“Huh?” said Julie.

“Prophecy?” said Bee on a sharp note.

“Wil,” said Julie. “What the actual fuck are you talking about?” Julie’s incredulous voice brought her into focus for Wilhelmina. Julie’s hair was wrapped in a black-and-white zigzag scarf to protect it from the snow, and her coat was brilliant green, like her eyeshadow. Her eyes flashed dark in her brown face. A necklace spilled out of her collar on a gold chain, a small gray elephant with crimson-and-orange butterfly wings. Wilhelmina had given Julie that necklace, the same day she’d given Bee an elephant-unicorn necklace, and shown them the elephant necklace with lilies sprouting from its trunk that she’d gotten for herself.

Julie’s necklace dragged Wilhelmina back to reality, where she began to understand that her friends had not seen what she’d just seen. This worked for Wilhelmina. She hadn’t seen it either. She put a steady hand to the wall, then peeked over the little girls’ heads at Madame Volara. The fortune teller sat quietly at her table, her head propped on her fist, idly watching the foot traffic at the end of the alley near the post office. Wilhelmina’s glasses fogged and cleared with her breaths, fogged and cleared, but the fortune teller didn’t change.

"I must be really stressed," she said.

"Yeah, you think so?" said Bee, acid in his tone, but it was an acid Wilhelmina recognized. All of them were worried, and tired, and similarly stressed. "It's not cool to see weird shit that's not there."

"Yeah, you scared us, Wil," said Julie. "Are you really okay?"

"Yeah," said Wilhelmina, who was thinking about the glowing letters that had spelled her name. Because they *hadn't* spelled her name, not really; they'd spelled *WIL-HELM-INA*. She didn't spell her name like that, with dashes, or pronounce it that way either. Which meant that none of this had been for her benefit. Right? It wasn't just that it hadn't happened. It hadn't happened to *her*.

"What was the prophecy?" asked Tina.

Wilhelmina focused on Tina's small, familiar face. Her mask was bright yellow, with a print of black cats wearing top hats. She wore her hair in two high Afro puffs, dampened by a scattering of snowflakes, and her dark eyes were narrowed, skeptical. Tina didn't believe Wilhelmina was okay.

"Your doughnut will be stale," said Wilhelmina.

"What?" cried Tina, delighted.

"Wilhelmina!" said Kimmy, giggling. "You got us."

Wilhelmina decided to go along with that explanation, even though she hated practical jokes and never would've staged one so random and weird. Bee was looking at her funny. So was Julie. They knew better. She avoided their eyes.

"Here," said Tina, who'd stepped back and was attaching a piece of paper awkwardly to the grabby claw at the end of her stick, using the squeeze grip at the top. "Maybe you need this."

She pointed the end at Wilhelmina, who took the paper, realizing then that it was a sheet of rectangular stickers.

*Spell for Goblin Banishment*, said one. *Wise Woman Potion*, said another. *Good Luck Spell*. Each sticker contained a heading, followed



by instructions, illustrated with witches on broomsticks, cauldrons, black cats.

“Wow,” said Wilhelmina. “Thanks, Tina.”

“I can’t believe tomorrow’s Halloween,” said Julie. “It doesn’t feel like Halloween.”

“Yeah,” said Wilhelmina, matching Julie’s doubtful tone, but wondering if Julie and Bee were planning to have Halloween without her this year. Private Halloween, without her. Would they do that? “You guys doing anything?”

“What would we do?” said Julie, shrugging, which was vaguely reassuring. But she wished, when they all left the alley and Julie and Bee set off together with the girls, that she could hug her friends, hold them against her trembling body for a moment. That she could see the bottom two-thirds of their *faces*, for crying out loud. But that wasn’t an option.

So she gripped Tina’s stickers tight in her hand and pushed through the snow, steady-footed. When she remembered Madame Volar’s prophecy, she told herself that her vision was unreliable today, and anyway, the message hadn’t been for her.

BACK IN HER CAR, Wilhelmina decided to go for a snowy walk by herself, less because she wanted to and more because there weren’t a lot of other options. She could go home while she waited for Aunt Margaret—her town was only a couple of miles away—but Wilhelmina was not in need of family time.

She knew where to go: Mount Auburn Cemetery, which would be empty in this weather, and pretty, and would soothe her jangled spirits, and maybe even amuse her too. Wilhelmina liked the headstones. Early Bostonians had funny names.

She cleaned the snow off the car again, this time remembering the side mirrors, the windshield wipers, et cetera. Inside, with the defrost

roaring, she inched her car back onto the road and drove through the storm to the massive cemetery's tall iron gates.

She was right. Inside, she found hardly any cars on the cemetery's winding roads. Wilhelmina crested small hills, turning randomly onto narrow drives that were sheltered by trees reaching down to her with beautiful snow-covered limbs. It was peaceful.

She kept poking at thoughts, then pushing them away. Like the makeup. Wilhelmina hardly ever bothered with makeup anymore, but she could've done hers too, if she'd known it was a thing. She liked to blend colors just as much as they did. She liked experimental eyes. But they hadn't told her, so she'd shown up makeupless, which had felt naked and boring alongside their own looks, which had probably evolved organically while they were hanging out together, laughing, touching each other, breathing the air of the same room. Why would it even occur to them to text her? Why would they think of her face?

As she drove, she realized she was clutching her scarf, her hand in a fist at her throat, because it was the closest she could get to her own necklace. Wilhelmina had acquired the trio of elephant necklaces last Christmas, Christmas of 2019, just months before Covid happened. It'd been her and Julie's senior year, Bee's junior year. Wilhelmina had been starting to feel some stirrings of excitement about the future, which had been an unexpected sensation, and a nice one. She'd thought she might like to go to UMass, in Western Massachusetts, and study something. She wasn't sure what yet. Botany? Philosophy? Fashion? Julie had applied to faraway places only: Atlanta, Philadelphia, Chicago, California. Julie didn't know what she wanted to study either, but she wanted a new corner of the world; Julie wanted to live in all the corners of the world. Bee still had one more year, but he was thinking about colleges too, which had been interesting, because of the unexpected revelation that Bee *did* know what he wanted to study. "Psychology and medicine," he'd said, "and French and Spanish."

Julie's eyebrows had shot up. "Monsieur Docteur Bee?"

"Señor Doctor Bee?" Wilhelmina had added.

Bee had grinned bright, then shrugged. "Not sure yet."

"Well, I can see it," Julie had said. Wilhelmina had seen something too: that everything was changing. It had made her want to bestow a symbolic treasure upon her friends, a small, portable container of love. Elephants had been the obvious choice, because of the Elephant Incident of 2016, which had involved a hypothetical question that had gone awry.

"If I were an elephant in an elephant sanctuary," Julie had asked one day, "would you guys be able to tell which one was me?"

"Oh, no problem," Bee had said. "You'd be the one reading a fantasy novel to the other elephants."

"Yeah," said Wilhelmina fondly, "flopped down in the middle of the floor."

Julie was, in fact, flopped on Wilhelmina's rug during this conversation, sprawled on her back with one knee bent and her arms stretched out. Julie had a way of always looking comfortable, as if surfaces molded themselves to her body. She was catlike that way. Wilhelmina and Bee lay on the bed. It was November, almost Thanksgiving. They were fourteen.

Julie spoke to Bee. "You'd be the elephant trying to help the other boy elephants connect to their feelings."

Wilhelmina grinned. "Yeah. You'd start a feelings circle."

"You'd start a space program for the elephants," Bee told Julie. "Elephant astronauts. Astrophants?"

They were feeding off of each other, the way they did sometimes. Wilhelmina always felt cozy while she listened. "You'd invent bath therapy," Julie said to Bee.

"What's that?" said Bee, wrinkling his nose.

"Like, elephants swimming in warm water to soothe their anxiety," said Julie.

A tiny needle of unfairness stung Wilhelmina at this. Of the three of them, she was the swimmer. She swam miles when she was in Pennsylvania with the aunts. “Would you guys be able to recognize me?” she asked.

“Of course,” said Bee. “You’d be separate.”

The word didn’t surprise Wilhelmina, exactly, but it hurt a little. She thought she knew what Bee meant by it. Bee and Julie both played soccer. Julie was in chess club. They had other groups, other people outside their official best-friendship with Wilhelmina, whereas Wilhelmina had Julie and Bee and mostly kept it at that. She was perfectly friendly to other people, it wasn’t that; she just didn’t *need* more friends. She spent her entire summers in Pennsylvania, with three old ladies.

“Separate,” she said carefully.

“Yeah, you’d be the queen elephant,” said Julie. “With three aunt elephants around you, and people would have to take a number.”

“Wait, what?” said Wilhelmina, floundering up to a sitting position. This was unexpected. “Take a number? Like, to approach me?”

“I mean,” said Julie, propping herself on one elbow. “I didn’t mean it in a bad way, Wil.”

“Am I unapproachable?” said Wilhelmina.

“No!” said Bee, also sitting up. “That’s the opposite of what we mean.”

“But you think I’m, like, unapproachably separate from the other elephants?” said Wilhelmina. “And, like, a queen? Like, am I *bossy*?”

“No!” said Julie. “Oh my god, Wil. Could we maybe start over with this?”

Wilhelmina was stumbling around inside herself in confusion. It wasn’t like her to get so upset all at once, or feel this injured at something Julie or Bee said—or maybe it *was* like her? Maybe she was a spoiled, melodramatic queen, and she’d just never realized it before?

“I have to pee,” she said, blundering for the door, but not stopping

at the bathroom, continuing on through the kitchen and out into the yard. The backyard of Wilhelmina's and Julie's duplex was a tiny space, full of dirt and patchy grass, dropping steeply to trees and a retaining wall where some crows were cawing. Wilhelmina stood there in her socks, watching the crows with her arms wrapped around her middle and her feet growing cold, her neck beginning to ache. She could feel every discordant squawk inside her own body, like she was the one crying out in pain.

Behind her, the door opened. "Wil?" came Julie's voice.

"I'm sorry," Wilhelmina said, not turning yet, because she was crying, which was embarrassing. "I overreacted."

"I shouldn't have said 'separate,'" said Bee. "I didn't mean separate from *us*, Wil."

"Okay," said Wilhelmina, not believing him.

"No, really, Wil!" he cried. "I only meant that you—you're different. You have something the other elephants don't have! It's, like, hard to describe. It's your aura."

"A snobby aura?" asked Wilhelmina.

"No," said Julie firmly. "It's, like, a comforting aura."

"Yes!" said Bee. "Thank you."

"It's like safety," said Julie.

"Yes!" said Bee again.

"That's why the other elephants are taking numbers to be near you, Wil," said Julie. "They want to feel how it feels to be your friend."

Wilhelmina was confused again, because all of this sounded a bit unlikely. She turned to study her friends. Julie looked dead certain about what she was saying, and Bee was nodding with his entire face scrunched up in thoughtfulness.

Wilhelmina knew their ways, their expressions. They weren't making shit up just to placate her. Okay, then. She was the comforting, safe elephant?

“Do you guys feel like you need to take a number to be with me?” she asked, because she didn’t want that.

“Noooooooo!” said Bee, going high-pitched with it, like a siren of protest.

“You’re *our* elephant, Wil,” said Julie. “The other elephants better take a number.”

“Yeah, they can’t have you,” said Bee.

“Okay,” said Wilhelmina. “Can I be part of your space program and your feelings circle?”

“Of course!” said Julie. “But do you really want to be part of Bee’s feelings circle?”

Wilhelmina didn’t actually want to be part of either group. She just wanted to know she was welcome. But she recognized the invitation to tease Bee, and return things to normal. “Maybe not,” she said, snorting.

“Hey,” Bee said, in pretend indignation. “I’m doing good work.”

Wilhelmina stepped toward her friends. A bit shyly, she held out her arms. “Could I have an elephant hug?”

“Of course,” said Bee, practically leaping across the yard to her. Julie followed.

“I’m a little sensitive, maybe,” Wilhelmina admitted while they hugged. “I’m sorry I made it a thing.”

“We’re all a little sensitive,” Julie said, which was true. It was November 2016, and a pretty obviously awful person had just been elected president. People loved him. It was bewildering. And it was hard to know what was coming.

As Wilhelmina drove through the cemetery, she remembered how it had felt four years ago to believe, if only for a few confused minutes, that her friends considered her the separate elephant. The one who didn’t belong. She’d felt herself falling into a funnel of loneliness. But Wilhelmina had been fourteen then. She hadn’t known who she was yet; of course she’d misunderstood. Wasn’t it different now?

*Didn't they look like a couple today?* she asked herself again, directing her car up a small rise and around a corner. *They did, right?*

On the road ahead, beside a massive willow that hung with snow, Wilhelmina saw a woman walking around a parked car. Wilhelmina didn't want an interaction with a stranger. She would drive past the woman, find another road to turn onto, and park where she could continue to be sad and alone.

She neared the woman, driving in that slow-motion manner unique to snowstorms, when the world is silent except for your own blasting heat and the squeaky crunch of your tires on snow. Then Wilhelmina realized that the woman wasn't a stranger. White and white-haired, wearing a black peacoat and a flowered scarf, this was Mrs. Mardrosian, who lived around the corner from Wilhelmina and Julie in a giant house. Giant in the sense that it was probably twice as big as the building Wilhelmina and Julie lived in, plus their building was a duplex, Julie's apartment above and Wilhelmina's below. Mrs. Mardrosian owned her house and lived in the whole thing.

Wilhelmina still had hopes of sneaking by unrecognized. There was nothing wrong with Mrs. Mardrosian, precisely. But she'd been Wilhelmina's dad's boss years ago when he'd worked at the public library, which meant she would ask Wilhelmina questions. She would want to know how the Harts were doing in the pandemic. She would ask how Wilhelmina's father Theo liked his new library job in Cambridge. She would talk about the election, which Wilhelmina definitely didn't want to talk about while not knowing for whom Mrs. Mardrosian was voting. Also, there was without a doubt something wrong with Wilhelmina's eyesight today, because Mrs. Mardrosian was ever-so-slightly glowing at the edges. *Agh.* Wilhelmina tried to hide behind the most fogged-up part of her windows.

But then she looked closer at Mrs. Mardrosian's car, a big, old, taupe Mercedes sedan, and saw that it had a flat tire.

With a sigh, Wilhelmina pulled over.

"Mrs. Mardrosian?" she called, climbing out, pulling up her mask. "Do you need help?"

Mrs. Mardrosian hardly seemed to notice her. She was digging around in the snow beside the road with her ice scraper and talking to herself. Wailing to herself, really; she almost sounded like she was weeping. At least she was no longer glowing.

"Mrs. Mardrosian?" Wilhelmina called, stepping closer. "Did you lose something?"

"My keys," Mrs. Mardrosian wailed. "Oh, it's hopeless!"

"Your keys?" said Wilhelmina. "To your car?"

"What? Oh, hello, is that you, Wilhelmina?" said Mrs. Mardrosian, straightening, turning to her. "Oh, thank heavens. I may need to ask you for a ride."

Wilhelmina didn't love the idea of giving an elderly woman a ride during a pandemic while she lived with two other elderly women and an asthmatic father she was meant to be protecting, but of course she was going to have to do *something*. "Help me understand," she said. "You have a flat tire *and* you lost your keys?"

"I never used to get into these situations," said Mrs. Mardrosian. "Oh, what would Levon think?"

Wilhelmina remembered a conversation then, a recent one between her parents. Mrs. Mardrosian had lost her husband. "All alone in that big place," Theo had said. "I feel for her. She was a rotten boss, but I feel for her."

Now Wilhelmina was feeling for her too, imagining what it would be like to lose one's husband *and* one's keys, then get a flat tire, in a cemetery, in a snowstorm, in a pandemic. And she remembered a tall, spare man walking a small dog around the neighborhood. Somehow she knew, though she'd never met him, that that had been Levon Mardrosian. He hadn't been friendly. He hadn't smiled at the dog, and



he'd never even looked Wilhelmina's way. But he'd bent down with a groan and scooped the dog's poop into a bag with meticulous attention, and then he'd carried it off, instead of dumping it into a neighbor's garbage can.

Wilhelmina walked toward Mrs. Mardrosian's car, stopping as she neared the woman. "Would you mind stepping back?"

"What? Oh, yes," the woman said distractedly, moving away, then digging in the snow near a headstone topped with a mournful angel.

Wilhelmina didn't know why she was compelled to do what she did next. She walked all around Mrs. Mardrosian's big Mercedes, sticking her hand into the tire wells, under the bumpers, and behind the license plate. She knew what she was looking for, but she didn't know why she expected to find it.

Her fingers touched a small, metallic box stuck to a metal ledge in one of the tire wells.

"Mrs. Mardrosian?" she called, yanking the magnetic box away from the car, then sliding it open to confirm that there was a key inside. "It looks like I found your extra key."

"My what?" cried Mrs. Mardrosian, staring at Wilhelmina with her ice scraper held before her vertically, like she was illuminating the scene with a candle.

Wilhelmina displayed the box in her hand.

"What—how—oh, Levon must've done it. Levon must have known I would lose my head," said Mrs. Mardrosian.

"I guess so," said Wilhelmina. "Now, can I change your tire?"

Mrs. Mardrosian lowered her ice scraper and goggled at Wilhelmina. "*You* know how to change a tire?"

Wilhelmina knew how to do a lot of things. It was part of the competence required when one was the eldest Hart child in a pandemic, with two small siblings aged ten and four to care for, two distracted parents, and more recently, two great-aunts. She could cook and shop

and research health insurance and supervise virtual school and drive everyone everywhere and unclog the drains and fix the Wi-Fi and bring in the mail and budget and cut hair, and yes, she could change a tire.

“Of course,” she said, hearing that her own voice had dropped to a lower register, the way it did sometimes when she was annoyed. It was a new development, Wilhelmina’s “serious” voice, one that kept taking her by surprise and one of which she despaired, because her mother’s voice did the very same thing, and Wilhelmina had always found it intensely irritating. Cleo was a therapist. Whenever Cleo was moved to say something profound and corny, it always came out in that resonant, cello-like timbre. Wilhelmina felt betrayed by her own vocal cords.

“Would you like to wait inside the car?” she asked Mrs. Mardrosian, trying to raise her pitch, but possibly warbling like an intoxicated songbird. “Or outside the car, at least six feet away from me?” She added that last part because Mrs. Mardrosian, who wore no mask, kept trying to edge too close.

“Oh,” said Mrs. Mardrosian, backing away. “Of course. Perhaps I’ll keep looking for my keys. After all, once I drive home, I’ll need a way into the house.”

Wilhelmina used the hidden key to open the trunk of Mrs. Mardrosian’s car. There she found a jack, a spare tire, a lug wrench, and some beautiful leather work gloves that looked like they’d never been used, all of which she guessed Mrs. Mardrosian was unaware she owned.

“Maybe your husband hid an extra key outside your home too,” she said, hauling on the tire, then beginning to feel a painful tightness in her neck and pectorals. “In the mailbox? Or in one of those fake rocks?”

“What? Oh. Yes. That does sound familiar. Levon died. Did you know? He died, and he didn’t tell me all these things first. I just can’t get over someone like you changing a tire,” said Mrs. Mardrosian, who was scratching in the snow by the road again.

Wilhelmina said nothing to this, because she wasn’t sure what Mrs.

Mardrosian meant, and there was a good chance she was better off not knowing. Someone like her, meaning a girl? A nice white girl, specifically? Someone short and fat? Someone in black ankle boots, red leggings, a knit turquoise dress, red glasses, and a red coat with a wide belt snug around her middle? Wilhelmina didn't want to know which part of her person disqualified her from the useful skill of tire-changing in the mind of Mrs. Mardrosian, so she stretched her hurting neck once, then got started removing the hubcap.

Mrs. Mardrosian came too close again. "Regardless, you're an angel," she said, pointing her ice scraper vaguely at the angel on the headstone nearby. "You saved me, Wilhelmina. I may even have time to early vote when you're done."

Wilhelmina really, really did not have the wherewithal to talk about the election. She didn't want to know which side Mrs. Mardrosian was on. She worked with the lug wrench, trying to seem like she was far too busy for conversation.

Then she saw Mrs. Mardrosian with her shoulders slumped, poking at the ground. Dabbing her eyes with her sleeve, and sniffing. Muttering to herself, "Oh, Levon."

Wilhelmina decided she wanted to be changing Mrs. Mardrosian's tire, no matter what they talked about.

AT LEAST THE CAR INCIDENT killed some time. Afterward, Wilhelmina went walking.

She could remember other solitary walks in this cemetery. It was a place she'd once liked to visit alone, because it was beautiful, and quiet enough that she could hear her own feelings. Then, at the beginning of the pandemic, the cemetery had closed to walkers, and in the disruption of everything changing, she'd forgotten how much she liked the hills and trees and the old gray headstones. She liked the geese, the wild turkeys; the hawks that dropped down suddenly from the sky. She'd

seen a snow goose here once with Frankie, its huge, white wings tipped with black. The sight of it had made her perfectly happy. That was a thing Wilhelmina had been capable of once: pure, plain happiness.

She'd never seen the cemetery looking like this though. In late October, the trees were always vibrant with fall foliage, but today they were heavy with snow too. Red, orange, and gold burst through blankets of white. And some of the trees hadn't even started to turn yet. Thick with green leaves, their snow cover was an anomaly, two seasons manifested at once.

Wilhelmina almost forgot to look at the gravestones. She wandered among them with her eyes raised to the trees, occasionally remembering to glance down. She stumbled upon a family named Crowninshield, then one named Worsnop. *Wilhelmina Crowninshield*, she thought. *Wilhelmina Worsnop*. She stopped at a stone with a single word: SPARROW. *Wilhelmina Sparrow. Pretty good.*

She noticed the carved dogs, the angels—Wilhelmina had always been drawn to the angels—but mostly watched the snow collect in the branches above. No one was around, so she lowered her mask. This improved her vision vastly; she had to keep wiping her glasses dry, but the inner fog problem went away. The new-glasses distortion remained, but Wilhelmina had steady feet.

She rolled her shoulders. Wilhelmina had chronic pain that always started in her neck and shoulders, then grew achier the more she used her hands. Cold made it worse, as did stress. Stretching helped.

So when Wilhelmina came upon a giant maple, brilliant crimson leaves clogged with snow, she propped one forearm against its trunk, then the other, bracing her Hart feet on its roots and stretching her pectoral muscles until they cried out from the relief of it.

Then she saw something through the branches above. Something dropping from the flat, sunless sky, like the falling snow . . . except that it was big, winged, and white. No, not winged. It was—a parachute? A

great white parachute, floating down from low, thick clouds. With no airplane above it. In a cemetery, in a snowstorm.

Wilhelmina burst out from underneath her maple, following the path of the parachute, trying to keep sight of it through glasses that beaded with falling snow. She half ran, almost tripping over a low gravestone. The parachute sank evenly, aiming for a cluster of trees in a low basin nearby.

Squinting, Wilhelmina could see no person suspended below its canopy. It was dropping not a human, but a package: something small and rectangular. The package glinted yellow and gold, painful to look at, difficult for her eyes to define. And then, when she entered the cluster of trees, she *did* see a person. Someone like her, on the ground, pursuing the parachute with eyes to the sky just like she was, but from the opposite direction.

Aggravated, Wilhelmina pulled her mask up, continuing to bolt along, feeling like it was a competition now. That was *her* parachute, dammit, and that person—that guy—

Wilhelmina faltered, realizing then that the person was James Fang, a boy she half knew from school. He was new-ish, or anyway, he'd moved to Watertown from somewhere nearby at the beginning of junior year. He was one of those sporty, athletic types, and he'd graduated last year, like her. She didn't falter because he was sporty and athletic. Nor did she falter because she'd lost her competitive spirit. No, Wilhelmina faltered because James Fang's Italian-Chinese-American family owned a doughnut shop, Alfie Fang's, which her family had patronized for many years. Wilhelmina had had enough of inexplicable events involving doughnuts for one day.

Except that now, James was bounding gracefully into the space between the trees like an antelope, clearly on an interception path with the parachute, and that was too much for Wilhelmina. She put on another burst of speed.

He got there first, dropping to his knees just as the sparkly, gold thing bumped gently to the ground. He put his hands on it, and he was inspecting it—he seemed to be untying a glittering bow and pulling a ribbon away from it—when Wilhelmina arrived.

“Wait!” she cried.

Starting in surprise, James looked up, then raised his hand as if blocking a great light. Wilhelmina saw a glow reflected in his dark eyes; he almost seemed to wince at the sight of her. Wilhelmina had just enough time to find this insulting before James dug into the collar of his puffy sky-colored coat and pulled up a mask.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “The sun is behind you. The—this thing—”

“I saw it falling,” said Wilhelmina.

“It’s a present,” he said, pulling the ribbon away, then folding back a kind of wrapping paper made of—leaves? And flowers? Fuchsia, scarlet, and green leaves and flowers seemed to fall away, until James was holding a small, glittering object, rectangular and flat, with brilliant light across it that spelled out a message. Wilhelmina saw the words on the object clearly. They said, TRUST WIL-HELM-INA.

James looked up at her again, still blocking his own view with his hand, as if dazzled. “You’re Wil-helm-ina, right?” he said, pronouncing the word “helm” in the middle, just like it was written.

“No,” said Wilhelmina firmly. “That’s not me.”

“You’re not Wilhelmina Hart?” he said, pronouncing it correctly this time. “I saw you at school every day. You’re memorable!”

Wilhelmina didn’t know what that was supposed to mean. “Yeah, but my name doesn’t have dashes, and it’s not pronounced like that. The second *L* is silent. Look, see? It’s not me.”

Creasing his brow, James studied the small, glittering object in his hands. TRUST WIL-HELM-INA, it blared.

“Is this the time to get picky about punctuation?” he said.

“Definitely,” said Wilhelmina, with feeling.

“Okay, but,” said James, then squeaked in astonishment—and then Wilhelmina was squeaking too—because the little sparkly sign in James’s hands broke apart, then vanished. It vanished! Wilhelmina came closer, too close, trying to see if he’d dropped it into the snow. But he was turning his hands over and scrabbling around looking for it. It was gone.

“What?” he cried.

“Where did it—”

“It was here, wasn’t it?” he cried. “We didn’t imagine it?”

“I saw it,” said Wilhelmina, then immediately changed her mind. “But you’re right. We imagined it.”

“Joint hallucination?” he said, glancing at her skeptically. “At least you’re not glowing anymore.”

“I wasn’t glowing.”

“You were most definitely glowing. But what happened to the flowers?” said James, looking around again. “The ribbon?”

“What happened to the *parachute*?” said Wilhelmina, pushing her mind back in an attempt to remember. When had she last noticed the parachute? She had the eerie sense that it had disappeared from her sight the very moment the package had hit the ground.

“What parachute?” said James.

“It dropped from a parachute.”

“What? No! Didn’t it drop from an owl?”

“An *owl*?”

“A gigantic snowy owl?” said James. “Flew out of the tree and dropped it?”

“What are you even talking about?” cried Wilhelmina, then added in growing aggravation, “This is Massachusetts! Snowy owls live in the Arctic!”

“Maybe it did look like a parachute,” said James doubtfully, “now that you mention it.”

“Well, which one was it?” said Wilhelmina. “An Arctic bird, or a parachute? They’re not the same!”

“I . . . don’t know,” said James, who was rubbing snow out of his wavy dark hair and craning his face up into the trees. “Flimflammy,” he muttered under his breath. “This is flimflammy.”

“‘Flimflammy?’” said Wilhelmina. “What the fuck does that even *mean*?” She knew she was speaking in her cello voice again, indignant and profound. She knew that she sounded like she was accusing him of something. She couldn’t help it. Wilhelmina was frightened.

But James didn’t even seem to notice. “Why are we even *here*?” he cried to the trees.

It was a good question. Why were they here, James kneeling in the snow with the knees of his jeans soaked through, Wilhelmina standing above him?

She backed away a few feet. They were solitary, alone. No parachutes, owls, flowers, or sparkly packages present to help them make sense of this interaction. Just tree branches clumped with snow, stretching across the sky. James was staring up at the branches, as if waiting for another owl to arrive with a placard bearing an explanation.

“Well, anyway,” said Wilhelmina. “I should go.”

James turned his dark, inscrutable eyes to her face. “I’m supposed to trust you,” he said.

“Or some other person,” she said. “Wil-*helm*-ina.”

“You’re the only Wilhelmina here.”

“Okay, then,” said Wilhelmina, doggedly backing farther away. “Trust me when I say we hallucinated this.”

As she increased the distance between them, James pushed his mask down from his face, watching her. His expression was incredulous, dazed with wonder, but he was also smiling. And kind of adorable. James Fang had a smile that was made of pure joy.

“Shouldn’t we at least exchange numbers?” he called out.



“I have to get to Harvard Square,” she said. “I need to pick up my aunt and a clock.” *Shaped like an owl*, she didn’t add, because she didn’t want to make any more connections.

“You can find me at the doughnut shop!” he called after her, but Wilhelmina was already speeding away.

INTERIM  
SUMMER 2009

Frankie hadn't had family of her own, at least not any she ever talked about. She always lit a candle on the same day every June. Wilhelmina knew it was for Frankie's father, but whenever Wilhelmina asked questions about him, Esther and Aunt Margaret would . . . not shush her exactly, because they weren't the types of aunts who shushed children. But they would form a sort of soft but protective barrier between Frankie and all questions. Wilhelmina could feel it thickening the air as the aunts murmured and ho-hummed. They would tell Wilhelmina, "Frankie may not want to talk about it. Let's wait for her to volunteer." Which Frankie never did.

Frankie seemed to have no pictures either. Wilhelmina imagined a picture of a shortish, sturdy-ish man in old-fashioned clothing, with tanned skin and thick silver hair like Frankie's, maybe with Frankie's generous nose and warm smile. When Frankie lit the candle, she always set a little battered metal crucifix beside it that hung from a short chain of black beads, like it was part of a broken rosary. She'd grown up in a town not far from the aunts' Pennsylvania house, on a small farm that was no longer a farm but a housing development, plus a shopping complex at which she never shopped. Aunt Margaret and Esther shopped there sometimes. Frankie didn't mind. "It's a long way to the next Target," she would say, watching from the vegetable garden while Margaret or Esther emerged from the car with the telltale shopping bag. Then, with her usual, familiar creaks and groans, she would stand, wipe the

dirt from her knees, and extend her hand, which was always warm and rough when Wilhelmina took it. “Shall we go see if they’ve brought us any treasures, Wilhelmina?”

Aunt Margaret had also grown up nearby, in the same town as Frankie. Aunt Margaret and Frankie had gone to school together, then met Esther in college. Aunt Margaret’s childhood’s house was still standing; Aunt Margaret always said it did and didn’t look the same. She could recognize its shape, but the color had changed, and the shed was gone, and the lawn was perfectly landscaped now, the neighborhood around it gentrified. It made her feel a bit unsettled to drive by it, she said. Wilhelmina’s family was her only remaining kin. Her brother, Wilhelmina’s paternal grandfather, had died a long time ago.

Esther, in contrast, had a very large family seeming to hail from everywhere, with hubs in Miami and New York. Most everyone was Cuban or Jewish or both; Esther had had a white Jewish mother and an Afro-Cuban dad, and had grown up in Washington Heights. The refrigerator door was crammed with pictures of this grandniece’s bat mitzvah, that cousin-three-times-removed’s quinceañera, and dozens of babies. Her phone conversations were sprinkled with Spanish or Yiddish or both, depending on who was on the other end of the line. Her sister and many of her cousins still lived in New York. At least once every summer, one of them would pass through on their way to somewhere else and stay for a couple days. Once, two of her ancient tías came, not because they were passing through, but just to visit; Tía Maria and Tía Rosa, two tiny wrinkled women who spoke little English but kept up a constant joyful conversation with each other and Esther in Spanish, and Frankie a little too, because Frankie knew some Spanish. They liked to sit in the sun, stretching their feet out and drinking Frankie’s iced tea. One of them, Tía Rosa, drew sometimes, in a sketchbook. Wilhelmina peeked once and saw a butterfly, a toad, a ladybug, a dandelion in a patch of grass, the sycamore tree that stood outside her own bedroom window.

One summer, when Wilhelmina was seven—it was 2009—Esther's cousin Ruben visited. He stayed a few days because he was handy and the aunts had a list of tasks he declared he was happy to perform. He set up a TV he'd brought with him, a hand-me-down from one of Esther's cousins. He fixed the gutters. He replaced some missing shingles on the side of the house, then painted them. He even built Frankie a low kneeling bench, which wasn't on the list. He constructed it to be sturdy but light, so that Frankie could move it around easily in her garden. After he'd nailed the last nail and sanded the last edge, he came to the border of the vegetable patch, where a tangle of big leaves hid the baby pumpkins. Then he held it out with his chin to his chest, almost bashful, as if he thought his help might be rejected. When Frankie saw him standing there, she cried out, "Ruben, you dear!" and smiled a smile so radiant that Ruben's face burst into happiness.

Bee was there with Wilhelmina that summer. Bee was invited to stay with Wilhelmina and the aunts every summer, but this was the one summer his parents actually let him come. He was almost, but not quite, seven, and he was called Tobey then. While he and Wilhelmina played in the yard or worked with Frankie in the garden, Ruben carried the ladder from one part of the house to another, climbing it with a hammer in his belt and nails in his mouth, passing from shade into sun. Sometimes he climbed so high, right up to the roof tiles, that Wilhelmina, watching, felt the emptiness beneath his feet and had to look away, whirling with a dizziness that Ruben himself did not seem troubled by. She would push her hands into the dirt beside Frankie and the earth would stop spinning.

Every morning, the aunts and Ruben had breakfast before Esther and Aunt Margaret left for work. One day, very early, while Wilhelmina was pattering down the stairs with sleep still sweet and heavy in her limbs, she heard them talking in the kitchen.

“You know what I’ve always wondered?” said Ruben. “Do you three ladies sleep together in one big bed?”

“Ruben, dear,” said Aunt Margaret, with flint in her voice. None of the aunts had a habit of sharpness, but the kitchen suddenly felt full of sharp aunts. “Is that your business?”

“Uh,” said Ruben. “No.”

“Is it a respectful question, furthermore?” Esther put in.

Ruben’s apologies were immediate, profuse, and heartfelt. “Honestly, Ruben,” Esther said a few times to her cousin, but every time she said it, she sounded a little less exasperated, because it was clear that Ruben understood the rebuke. All three of the aunts returned to sounding like themselves, their voices a melodious counterpoint as they talked with Ruben of other things.

After Esther and Aunt Margaret drove off, Ruben began his chores. Wilhelmina and Bee went out to play near Frankie, who was picking beans in the garden.

Curious, Wilhelmina sat in the yard, watching Ruben carry his ladder around. Ruben didn’t look like Esther. Esther was tall and slender with pale brown skin and dark hair streaked with silver that she wore in braids, and a soft smile that appeared often, sometimes teasing, sometimes ironic, other times a bit secretive. Also, she was stylish. “A sharp dresser,” Frankie always said approvingly, “whereas I am a sparkly dresser,” which was true. Frankie always had a sparkling pendant, or something shining in her ears.

Ruben, in contrast, had a rare but bright smile and a big voice, he wore a Mets cap over curly pale hair, and he had short, powerful limbs and pale skin, more like Aunt Margaret than like Esther. He wore baggy shorts and T-shirts. His face was different from Esther’s; she looked Black, and he looked white. Their laughs were different. He sang while he worked, in a rough, scratchy timbre; Esther didn’t sing

much, but when she did, her voice was smooth and clear. When Ruben talked, though, a New York accent like Esther's came pouring out of his mouth.

Wilhelmina watched him carry the ladder past the rosebushes that grew wild against the old, sagging carriage house, then around the corner of the big house and out of sight. A moment later he came back, collected a can of paint from the shed, and disappeared again. Her thoughts followed him. Wilhelmina was thinking about Ruben's question.

Nearby, Bee—called Tobey—lay on his back in a patch of tall grass, watching lilies bob and sway above his head. A bee was bumbling from lily to lily. It brought to mind the low drone of a tiny announcer's voice, starting and stopping, starting and stopping, like the man who introduced the players coming to bat at a baseball game.

"Do you remember that boy at the baseball game?" said Bee.

Frankie, who loved baseball, had taken them to a minor-league game weeks ago. It was funny that they were both thinking about it now. "What boy?" said Wilhelmina. "Tobey?" she added, when he didn't answer. "What boy?"

"The boy sitting right behind us. His grandfather kept calling him Raimondo."

That sounded familiar. "Sort of."

"And he kept saying, 'Stop calling me Raimondo.'"

Wilhelmina hadn't been paying much attention, but she could hear that boy's voice in her memory. "Yeah, I think so."

"The grandfather finally said, 'All right, what should I call you then? Can I call you Ray? Will you be my Ray of light?'"

"I missed that part," said Wilhelmina, who liked the idea of being someone's ray of light. "You were really listening in, weren't you?"

Bee didn't speak for a while. Wilhelmina watched Frankie push up onto her feet and carry her new bench and her basket to the cucumbers. Frankie wore her long, silver hair in a French twist that wound around

her head. Wilhelmina thought it made her look like a queen, even if her jeans were muddy and her fingernails caked with dirt.

“My dad’s name is Tobey,” said Bee.

Wilhelmina hugged herself. Bee’s dad was a doctor, and Wilhelmina had noticed that everyone was always super nice to him. Actually, he wasn’t just a doctor; he was an emergency room doctor, which meant he saved people’s lives all the time. People turned away from other people when he entered a room and held their hands out for him to shake, looking into his face admiringly. They watched him when he moved off to talk to someone else. He was tall, dark-haired like Bee, and supposedly very handsome. People certainly acted like he was handsome. But to Wilhelmina, he’d always had the feeling of a false smile and hard eyes pasted to the outside wall of a cold, empty cave. When he’d just woken up or when he hadn’t slept for days—two states in which Wilhelmina encountered him fairly often because of his strange work hours—the impression was heightened. When his eyes touched hers, Wilhelmina shivered. And she knew that Bee was afraid of him.

“I feel like my name is something else,” said Bee.

“Something else?”

“I mean, not Tobey.”

“Oh,” said Wilhelmina, surprised. “What do you think your name is?”

Bee sat up. “I think it’s Bee,” he said, looking into Wilhelmina’s face with his own face scrunched up in perplexity. “Like a bumblebee.” Then, just as abruptly, he lay down again.

Wilhelmina looked from Bee to the bumblebee bumbling around the lilies, then she lay down too. It was a lot to take in. He didn’t much resemble a bumblebee. His hair was thick and wavy, his eyes were greenish-brown, and his skin was flushed with summer freckles; he was skinny and long, not squat and round. He didn’t bumble or buzz. He was quiet, and thoughtful, and serious. He didn’t sting. “I think it’s cool to choose your own name,” she said.

"I don't think my dad will let me," he said.

Frankie's voice rose from the garden. "Your father has no power over your name, Bee," she said. "Should I call you Bee?"

"Yes," said Bee, who sounded pretty sure about it.

"Lovely," said Frankie. "It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Bee. Your father can refuse to call you by your name, and he can refuse to let you change it officially until you're an adult. But that has nothing whatsoever to do with what your name actually *is*. It's *your* name. *You* know what it is. Names are powerful. They're more powerful than one opinionated man."

Wilhelmina closed her eyes, thinking about names. Imagining them as powerful. The grass tickled her neck. She could tell that Frankie was in the tomato patch now, because the earthy, unmistakable smell of tomato vines was filling her throat. *Wilhelmina*, she thought. *Bee. Wilhelmina. Frankie. Ruben. Wilhelmina. Bee. Tobey*. She shivered again. Already, "Tobey" felt wrong. Tobey was her friend's father.

"I like Bee as a name," she said, which was true, even if she didn't understand it as a name for her friend.

"Thanks," said Bee.

"I'm worried I'll forget and call you the wrong name."

"It's okay," he said. "I'll remind you."

Wilhelmina remained on her back with her eyes closed, idly musing. Her mind returned to Ruben's question this morning. When Frankie moved away from the tomatoes to examine the garden's single promising eggplant, Wilhelmina knew she'd moved, even though she couldn't see Frankie. She searched her senses for signs of Ruben, and knew he was still on the far side of the house, climbing the ladder again.

"Bee?" she said.

"Yes?"

She could hear something new in his voice, because she'd called him *Bee*. It was a kind of confused happiness. "Bee," she said, wanting



to cause him more happiness. “Can you always tell where people are?”

Bee thought for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Like, when you wake up in the middle of the night,” said Wilhelmina. “Can you tell where everyone is in the house? Or, say you closed your eyes now and Frankie went to the shed, and I went inside. Would you know where we were?”

“I mean, I could guess where you were,” he said. “But how would I *know* where you were?”

“Just by,” said Wilhelmina, “I don’t know. By how it *feels*.”

“I mean,” he said again, “I think I could, maybe a little. But I think that’s just because I would probably hear shed noises or something.”

“Yeah,” said Wilhelmina, understanding, and wondering if that was what she meant too. If when she came awake during that early part of the morning when it felt like an extra door had opened in the world, when the other humans in the house were asleep and the house was still and waiting, when the owls were coming home and the robins were just starting to stir, if the reason she knew where Bee and Ruben were, and whether the aunts were sleeping all together that night, or all apart, or in some other configuration, was because of the noises she almost didn’t realize she was hearing.

Frankie’s voice, warm and scratchy, broke into her thoughts again. “Some people have more of a sense of those things than others,” she said.

Wilhelmina sat up, blinking. Looking for her aunt. Finding her in the eggplant patch, exactly where Wilhelmina had known her to be.

As Frankie wiped the sheen of sweat from her brow, her skin glowed with the sun. She gave Wilhelmina her megawatt smile. “Maybe it’s part of your magic, Wilhelmina dear.”