A Little Life
[ I ]

Lispenard Street
The eleventh apartment had only one closet, but it did have a sliding glass door that opened onto a small balcony, from which he could see a man sitting across the way, outdoors in only a T-shirt and shorts even though it was October, smoking. Willem held up a hand in greeting to him, but the man didn’t wave back.

In the bedroom, Jude was accordioning the closet door, opening and shutting it, when Willem came in. “There’s only one closet,” he said.

“That’s okay,” Willem said. “I have nothing to put in it anyway.”

“Neither do I.” They smiled at each other. The agent from the building wandered in after them. “We’ll take it,” Jude told her.

But back at the agent’s office, they were told they couldn’t rent the apartment after all. “Why not?” Jude asked her.

“You don’t make enough to cover six months’ rent, and you don’t have anything in savings,” said the agent, suddenly terse. She had checked their credit and their bank accounts and had at last realized that there was something amiss about two men in their twenties who were not a couple and yet were trying to rent a one-bedroom apartment on a dull (but still expensive) stretch of Twenty-fifth Street. “Do you have anyone who can sign on as your guarantor? A boss? Parents?”

“Our parents are dead,” said Willem, swiftly.

The agent sighed. “Then I suggest you lower your expectations. No one who manages a well-run building is going to rent to candidates
with your financial profile.” And then she stood, with an air of finality, and looked pointedly at the door.

When they told JB and Malcolm this, however, they made it into a comedy: the apartment floor became tattooed with mouse droppings, the man across the way had almost exposed himself, the agent was upset because she had been flirting with Willem and he hadn’t reciprocated.

“Who wants to live on Twenty-fifth and Second anyway,” asked JB. They were at Pho Viet Huong in Chinatown, where they met twice a month for dinner. Pho Viet Huong wasn’t very good—the pho was curiously sugary, the lime juice was soapy, and at least one of them got sick after every meal—but they kept coming, both out of habit and necessity. You could get a bowl of soup or a sandwich at Pho Viet Huong for five dollars, or you could get an entrée, which were eight to ten dollars but much larger, so you could save half of it for the next day or for a snack later that night. Only Malcolm never ate the whole of his entrée and never saved the other half either, and when he was finished eating, he put his plate in the center of the table so Willem and JB—who were always hungry—could eat the rest.

“Of course we don’t want to live at Twenty-fifth and Second, JB,” said Willem, patiently, “but we don’t really have a choice. We don’t have any money, remember?”

“I don’t understand why you don’t stay where you are,” said Malcolm, who was now pushing his mushrooms and tofu—he always ordered the same dish: oyster mushrooms and braised tofu in a treacly brown sauce—around his plate, as Willem and JB eyed it.

“Well, I can’t,” Willem said. “Remember?” He had to have explained this to Malcolm a dozen times in the last three months. “Merritt’s boyfriend’s moving in, so I have to move out.”

“But why do you have to move out?”

“Because it’s Merritt’s name on the lease, Malcolm!” said JB.

“Oh,” Malcolm said. He was quiet. He often forgot what he considered inconsequential details, but he also never seemed to mind when people grew impatient with him for forgetting. “Right.” He moved the mushrooms to the center of the table. “But you, Jude—”

“I can’t stay at your place forever, Malcolm. Your parents are going to kill me at some point.”

“My parents love you.”
“That’s nice of you to say. But they won’t if I don’t move out, and soon.”

Malcolm was the only one of the four of them who lived at home, and as JB liked to say, if he had Malcolm’s home, he would live at home too. It wasn’t as if Malcolm’s house was particularly grand—it was, in fact, creaky and ill-kept, and Willem had once gotten a splinter simply by running his hand up its banister—but it was large: a real Upper East Side town house. Malcolm’s sister, Flora, who was three years older than him, had moved out of the basement apartment recently, and Jude had taken her place as a short-term solution: Eventually, Malcolm’s parents would want to reclaim the unit to convert it into offices for his mother’s literary agency, which meant Jude (who was finding the flight of stairs that led down to it too difficult to navigate anyway) had to look for his own apartment.

And it was natural that he would live with Willem; they had been roommates throughout college. In their first year, the four of them had shared a space that consisted of a cinder-blocked common room, where sat their desks and chairs and a couch that JB’s aunts had driven up in a U-Haul, and a second, far tinier room, in which two sets of bunk beds had been placed. This room had been so narrow that Malcolm and Jude, lying in the bottom bunks, could reach out and grab each other’s hands. Malcolm and JB had shared one of the units; Jude and Willem had shared the other.

“It’s blacks versus whites,” JB would say.

“It’s not white,” Willem would respond.

“And I’m not black,” Malcolm would add, more to annoy JB than because he believed it.

“Well,” JB said now, pulling the plate of mushrooms toward him with the tines of his fork, “I’d say you could both stay with me, but I think you’d fucking hate it.” JB lived in a massive, filthy loft in Little Italy, full of strange hallways that led to unused, oddly shaped cul-de-sacs and unfinished half rooms, the Sheetrock abandoned mid-construction, which belonged to another person they knew from college. Ezra was an artist, a bad one, but he didn’t need to be good because, as JB liked to remind them, he would never have to work in his entire life. And not only would he never have to work, but his children’s children’s children would never have to work: They could make bad, unsalable, worthless
art for generations and they would still be able to buy at whim the best oils they wanted, and impractically large lofts in downtown Manhattan that they could trash with their bad architectural decisions, and when they got sick of the artist’s life—as JB was convinced Ezra someday would—all they would need to do is call their trust officers and be awarded an enormous lump sum of cash of an amount that the four of them (well, maybe not Malcolm) could never dream of seeing in their lifetimes. In the meantime, though, Ezra was a useful person to know, not only because he let JB and a few of his other friends from school stay in his apartment—at any time, there were four or five people burrowing in various corners of the loft—but because he was a good-natured and basically generous person, and liked to throw excessive parties in which copious amounts of food and drugs and alcohol were available for free.

“Hold up,” JB said, putting his chopsticks down. “I just realized—there’s someone at the magazine renting some place for her aunt. Like, just on the verge of Chinatown.”

“How much is it?” asked Willem.

“Probably nothing—she didn’t even know what to ask for it. And she wants someone in there that she knows.”

“Do you think you could put in a good word?”

“Better—I’ll introduce you. Can you come by the office tomorrow?” Jude sighed. “I won’t be able to get away.” He looked at Willem.

“Don’t worry—I can. What time?”

“Lunchtime, I guess. One?”

“I’ll be there.”

Willem was still hungry, but he let JB eat the rest of the mushrooms. Then they all waited around for a bit; sometimes Malcolm ordered jackfruit ice cream, the one consistently good thing on the menu, ate two bites, and then stopped, and he and JB would finish the rest. But this time he didn’t order the ice cream, and so they asked for the bill so they could study it and divide it to the dollar.

The next day, Willem met JB at his office. JB worked as a receptionist at a small but influential magazine based in SoHo that covered the downtown art scene. This was a strategic job for him; his plan, as he’d explained to Willem one night, was that he’d try to befriend one of the
editors there and then convince him to feature him in the magazine. He estimated this taking about six months, which meant he had three more to go.

JB wore a perpetual expression of mild disbelief while at his job, both that he should be working at all and that no one had yet thought to recognize his special genius. He was not a good receptionist. Although the phones rang more or less constantly, he rarely picked them up; when any of them wanted to get through to him (the cell phone reception in the building was inconsistent), they had to follow a special code of ringing twice, hanging up, and then ringing again. And even then he sometimes failed to answer—his hands were busy beneath his desk, combing and plaiting snarls of hair from a black plastic trash bag he kept at his feet.

JB was going through, as he put it, his hair phase. Recently he had decided to take a break from painting in favor of making sculptures from black hair. Each of them had spent an exhausting weekend following JB from barbershop to beauty shop in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan, waiting outside as JB went in to ask the owners for any sweepings or cuttings they might have, and then lugging an increasingly awkward bag of hair down the street after him. His early pieces had included *The Mace*, a tennis ball that he had de-fuzzed, sliced in half, and filled with sand before coating it in glue and rolling it around and around in a carpet of hair so that the bristles moved like seaweed underwater, and “The Kwotidien,” in which he covered various household items—a stapler; a spatula; a teacup—in pelts of hair. Now he was working on a large-scale project that he refused to discuss with them except in snatches, but it involved the combing out and braiding together of many pieces in order to make one apparently endless rope of frizzing black hair. The previous Friday he had lured them over with the promise of pizza and beer to help him braid, but after many hours of tedious work, it became clear that there was no pizza and beer forthcoming, and they had left, a little irritated but not terribly surprised.

They were all bored with the hair project, although Jude—alone among them—thought that the pieces were lovely and would someday be considered significant. In thanks, JB had given Jude a hair-covered hairbrush, but then had reclaimed the gift when it looked like Ezra’s father’s friend might be interested in buying it (he didn’t, but JB never returned the hairbrush to Jude). The hair project had proved difficult in
other ways as well; another evening, when the three of them had some- how been once again coned into going to Little Italy and combing out more hair, Malcolm had commented that the hair stank. Which it did: not of anything distasteful but simply the tangy metallic scent of unwashed scalp. But JB had thrown one of his mounting tantrums, and had called Malcolm a self-hating Negro and an Uncle Tom and a traitor to the race, and Malcolm, who very rarely angered but who angered over accusations like this, had dumped his wine into the nearest bag of hair and gotten up and stamped out. Jude had hurried, the best he could, after Malcolm, and Willem had stayed to handle JB. And although the two of them reconciled the next day, in the end Willem and Jude felt (unfairly, they knew) slightly angrier at Malcolm, since the next weekend they were back in Queens, walking from barbershop to barbershop, trying to replace the bag of hair that he had ruined.

“How’s life on the black planet?” Willem asked JB now.

“Black,” said JB, stuffing the plait he was untangling back into the bag. “Let’s go; I told Annika we’d be there at one thirty.” The phone on his desk began to ring.

“Don’t you want to get that?”

“They’ll call back.”

As they walked downtown, JB complained. So far, he had concen- trated most of his seductive energies on a senior editor named Dean, whom they all called DeeAnn. They had been at a party, the three of them, held at one of the junior editor’s parents’ apartment in the Dakota, in which art-hung room bled into art-hung room. As JB talked with his coworkers in the kitchen, Malcolm and Willem had walked through the apartment together (Where had Jude been that night? Working, probably), looking at a series of Edward Burtynskys hanging in the guest bedroom, a suite of water towers by the Bechers mounted in four rows of five over the desk in the den, an enormous Gursky floating above the half bookcases in the library, and, in the master bedroom, an entire wall of Diane Arbuses, covering the space so thoroughly that only a few centimeters of blank wall remained at the top and bottom. They had been admiring a picture of two sweet-faced girls with Down syndrome playing for the camera in their too-tight, too-childish bathing suits, when Dean had approached them. He was a tall man, but he had a small, gophery, pockmarked face that made him appear feral and untrustworthy.
They introduced themselves, explained that they were here because they were JB’s friends. Dean told them that he was one of the senior editors at the magazine, and that he handled all the arts coverage.

“Ah,” Willem said, careful not to look at Malcolm, whom he did not trust not to react. JB had told them that he had targeted the arts editor as his potential mark; this must be him.

“Have you ever seen anything like this?” Dean asked them, waving a hand at the Arbuses.

“Never,” Willem said. “I love Diane Arbus.”

Dean stiffened, and his little features seemed to gather themselves into a knot in the center of his little face. “It’s DeeAnn.”

“What?”

“DeeAnn. You pronounce her name ‘DeeAnn.’”

They had barely been able to get out of the room without laughing.

“DeeAnn!” JB had said later, when they told him the story. “Christ! What a pretentious little shit.”

“But he’s your pretentious little shit,” Jude had said. And ever since, they had referred to Dean as “DeeAnn.”

Unfortunately, however, it appeared that despite JB’s tireless cultivation of DeeAnn, he was no closer to being included in the magazine than he had been three months ago. JB had even let DeeAnn suck him off in the steam room at the gym, and still nothing. Every day, JB found a reason to wander back into the editorial offices and over to the bulletin board on which the next three months’ story ideas were written on white note cards, and every day he looked at the section dedicated to up-and-coming artists for his name, and every day he was disappointed. Instead he saw the names of various no-talents and overhypes, people owed favors or people who knew people to whom favors were owed.

“If I ever see Ezra up there, I’m going to kill myself,” JB always said, to which the others said: You won’t, JB, and Don’t worry, JB—you’ll be up there someday, and What do you need them for, JB? You’ll find somewhere else, to which JB would reply, respectively, “Are you sure?,” and “I fucking doubt it,” and “I’ve fucking invested this time—three whole months of my fucking life—I better be fucking up there, or this whole thing has been a fucking waste, just like everything else,” everything else meaning, variously, grad school, moving back to New York, the hair series, or life in general, depending on how nihilistic he felt that day.
He was still complaining when they reached Lispenard Street. Willem was new enough to the city—he had only lived there a year—to have never heard of the street, which was barely more than an alley, two blocks long and one block south of Canal, and yet JB, who had grown up in Brooklyn, hadn’t heard of it either.

They found the building and punched buzzer 5C. A girl answered, her voice made scratchy and hollow by the intercom, and rang them in. Inside, the lobby was narrow and high-ceilinged and painted a curdled, gleaming shit-brown, which made them feel like they were at the bottom of a well.

The girl was waiting for them at the door of the apartment. “Hey, JB,” she said, and then looked at Willem and blushed.

“Annika, this is my friend Willem,” JB said. “Willem, Annika works in the art department. She’s cool.”

Annika looked down and stuck out her hand in one movement. “It’s nice to meet you,” she said to the floor. JB kicked Willem in the foot and grinned at him. Willem ignored him.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” he said.

“Well, this is the apartment? It’s my aunt’s? She lived here for fifty years but she just moved into a retirement home?” Annika was speaking very fast and had apparently decided that the best strategy was to treat Willem like an eclipse and simply not look at him at all. She was talking faster and faster, about her aunt, and how she always said the neighborhood had changed, and how she’d never heard of Lispenard Street until she’d moved downtown, and how she was sorry it hadn’t been painted yet, but her aunt had just, literally just moved out and they’d only had a chance to have it cleaned the previous weekend. She looked everywhere but at Willem—at the ceiling (stamped tin), at the floors (cracked, but parquet), at the walls (on which long-ago-hung picture frames had left ghostly shadows)—until finally Willem had to interrupt, gently, and ask if he could take a look through the rest of the apartment.

“Oh, be my guest,” said Annika, “I’ll leave you alone,” although she then began to follow them, talking rapidly to JB about someone named Jasper and how he’d been using Archer for everything, and didn’t JB think it looked a little too round and weird for body text? Now that Willem had his back turned to her, she stared at him openly, her rambling becoming more inane the longer she spoke.
JB watched Annika watch Willem. He had never seen her like this, so nervous and girlish (normally she was surly and silent and was actually a bit feared in the office for creating on the wall above her desk an elaborate sculpture of a heart made entirely of x-acto blades), but he had seen lots of women behave this way around Willem. They all had. Their friend Lionel used to say that Willem must have been a fisherman in a past life, because he couldn’t help but attract pussy. And yet most of the time (though not always), Willem seemed unaware of the attention. JB had once asked Malcolm why he thought that was, and Malcolm said he thought it was because Willem hadn’t noticed. JB had only grunted in reply, but his thinking was: Malcolm was the most obtuse person he knew, and if even Malcolm had noticed how women reacted around Willem, it was impossible that Willem himself hadn’t. Later, however, Jude had offered a different interpretation: he had suggested that Willem was deliberately not reacting to all the women so the other men around him wouldn’t feel threatened by him. This made more sense; Willem was liked by everyone and never wanted to make people feel intentionally uncomfortable, and so it was possible that, subconsciously at least, he was feigning a sort of ignorance. But still—it was fascinating to watch, and the three of them never tired of it, nor of making fun of Willem for it afterward, though he would normally just smile and say nothing.

“Does the elevator work well here?” Willem asked abruptly, turning around.

“What?” Annika replied, startled. “Yes, it’s pretty reliable.” She pulled her faint lips into a narrow smile that JB realized, with a stomach-twist of embarrassment for her, was meant to be flirtatious. Oh, Annika, he thought. “What exactly are you planning on bringing into my aunt’s apartment?”

“Our friend,” he answered, before Willem could. “He has trouble climbing stairs and needs the elevator to work.”

“Oh,” she said, flushing again. She was back to staring at the floor. “Sorry. Yes, it works.”

The apartment was not impressive. There was a small foyer, little larger than the size of a doormat, from which pronged the kitchen (a hot, greasy little cube) to the right and a dining area to the left that would accommodate perhaps a card table. A half wall separated this space from the living room, with its four windows, each striped with
bars, looking south onto the litter-scattered street, and down a short hall to the right was the bathroom with its milk-glass sconces and worn-enamel tub, and across from it the bedroom, which had another window and was deep but narrow; here, two wooden twin-bed frames had been placed parallel to each other, each pressed against a wall. One of the frames was already topped with a futon, a bulky, graceless thing, as heavy as a dead horse.

“The futon’s never been used,” Annika said. She told a long story about how she was going to move in, and had even bought the futon in preparation, but had never gotten to use it because she moved in instead with her friend Clement, who wasn’t her boyfriend, just her friend, and god, what a retard she was for saying that. Anyway, if Willem wanted the apartment, she’d throw in the futon for free.

Willem thanked her. “What do you think, JB?” he asked.

What did he think? He thought it was a shithole. Of course, he too lived in a shithole, but he was in his shithole by choice, and because it was free, and the money he would have had to spend on rent he was instead able to spend on paints, and supplies, and drugs, and the occasional taxi. But if Ezra were to ever decide to start charging him rent, no way he’d be there. His family may not have Ezra’s money, or Malcolm’s, but under no circumstances would they allow him to throw away money living in a shithole. They would find him something better, or give him a little monthly gift to help him along. But Willem and Jude didn’t have that choice: They had to pay their own way, and they had no money, and thus they were condemned to live in a shithole. And if they were, then this was probably the shithole to live in—it was cheap, it was downtown, and their prospective landlord already had a crush on fifty percent of them.

So “I think it’s perfect,” he told Willem, who agreed. Annika let out a yelp. And a hurried conversation later, it was over: Annika had a tenant, and Willem and Jude had a place to live—all before JB had to remind Willem that he wouldn’t mind Willem paying for a bowl of noodles for lunch, before he had to get back to the office.

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JB wasn’t given to introspection, but as he rode the train to his mother’s house that Sunday, he was unable to keep himself from expe-
riencing a vague sort of self-congratulation, combined with something approaching gratitude, that he had the life and family he did.

His father, who had emigrated to New York from Haiti, had died when JB was three, and although JB always liked to think that he remembered his face—kind and gentle, with a narrow strip of mustache and cheeks that rounded into plums when he smiled—he was never to know whether he only thought he remembered it, having grown up studying the photograph of his father that sat on his mother’s bedside table, or whether he actually did. Still, that had been his only sadness as a child, and even that was more of an obligatory sadness: He was fatherless, and he knew that fatherless children mourned the absence in their lives. He, however, had never experienced that yearning himself. After his father had died, his mother, who was a second-generation Haitian American, had earned her doctorate in education, teaching all the while at the public school near their house that she had deemed JB better than. By the time he was in high school, an expensive private day school nearly an hour’s commute from their place in Brooklyn, which he attended on scholarship, she was the principal of a different school, a magnet program in Manhattan, and an adjunct professor at Brooklyn College. She had been the subject of an article in *The New York Times* for her innovative teaching methods, and although he had pretended otherwise to his friends, he had been proud of her.

She had always been busy when he was growing up, but he had never felt neglected, had never felt that his mother loved her students more than she loved him. At home, there was his grandmother, who cooked whatever he wanted, and sang to him in French, and told him literally daily what a treasure he was, what a genius, and how he was the man in her life. And there were his aunts, his mother’s sister, a detective in Manhattan, and her girlfriend, a pharmacist and second-generation American herself (although she was from Puerto Rico, not Haiti), who had no children and so treated him as their own. His mother’s sister was sporty and taught him how to catch and throw a ball (something that, even then, he had only the slightest of interest in, but which proved to be a useful social skill later on), and her girlfriend was interested in art; one of his earliest memories had been a trip with her to the Museum of Modern Art, where he clearly remembered staring at *One: Number 31, 1950*, dumb with awe, barely listening to his aunt as she explained how Pollock had made the painting.
In high school, where a bit of revisionism seemed necessary in order to distinguish himself and, especially, make his rich white classmates uncomfortable, he blurred the truth of his circumstances somewhat: He became another fatherless black boy, with a mother who had completed school only after he was born (he neglected to mention that it was graduate school she had been completing, and so people assumed that he meant high school), and an aunt who walked the streets (again, they assumed as a prostitute, not realizing he meant as a detective). His favorite family photograph had been taken by his best friend in high school, a boy named Daniel, to whom he had revealed the truth just before he let him in to shoot their family portrait. Daniel had been working on a series of, as he called it, families “up from the edge,” and JB had had to hurriedly correct the perception that his aunt was a borderline streetwalker and his mother barely literate before he allowed his friend inside. Daniel’s mouth had opened and no sound had emerged, but then JB’s mother had come to the door and told them both to get in out of the cold, and Daniel had to obey.

Daniel, still stunned, positioned them in the living room: JB’s grandmother, Yvette, sat in her favorite high-backed chair, and around her stood his aunt Christine and her girlfriend, Silvia, to one side, and JB and his mother to the other. But then, just before Daniel could take the picture, Yvette demanded that JB take her place. “He is the king of the house,” she told Daniel, as her daughters protested. “Jean-Baptiste! Sit down!” He did. In the picture, he is gripping both of the armrests with his plump hands (even then he had been plump), while on either side, women beamed down at him. He himself is looking directly at the camera, smiling widely, sitting in the chair that should have been occupied by his grandmother.

Their faith in him, in his ultimate triumph, remained unwavering, almost disconcertingly so. They were convinced—even as his own conviction was tested so many times that it was becoming difficult to self-generate it—that he would someday be an important artist, that his work would hang in major museums, that the people who hadn’t yet given him his chances didn’t properly appreciate his gift. Sometimes he believed them and allowed himself to be buoyed by their confidence. At other times he was suspicious—their opinions seemed so the complete opposite of the rest of the world’s that he wondered whether they might be condescending to him, or just crazy. Or maybe they had bad
taste. How could four women’s judgment differ so profoundly from everyone else’s? Surely the odds of theirs being the correct opinion were not good.

And yet he was relieved to return every Sunday on these secret visits back home, where the food was plentiful and free, and where his grandmother would do his laundry, and where every word he spoke and every sketch he showed would be savored and murmured about approvingly. His mother’s house was a familiar land, a place where he would always be revered, where every custom and tradition felt tailored to him and his particular needs. At some point in the evening—after dinner but before dessert, while they all rested in the living room, watching television, his mother’s cat lying hotly in his lap—he would look at his women and feel something swell within him. He would think then of Malcolm, with his unsparingly intelligent father and affectionate but absentminded mother, and then of Willem, with his dead parents (JB had met them only once, over their freshman year move-out weekend, and had been surprised by how taciturn, how formal, how un-Willem they had been), and finally, of course, Jude, with his completely non-existent parents (a mystery, there—they had known Jude for almost a decade now and still weren’t certain when or if there had ever been parents at all, only that the situation was miserable and not to be spoken of), and feel a warm, watery rush of happiness and thankfulness, as if an ocean were rising up in his chest. I’m lucky, he’d think, and then, because he was competitive and kept track of where he stood against his peers in every aspect of life, I’m the luckiest one of all. But he never thought that he didn’t deserve it, or that he should work harder to express his appreciation; his family was happy when he was happy, and so his only obligation to them was to be happy, to live exactly the life he wanted, on the terms he wanted.

“We don’t get the families we deserve,” Willem had said once when they had been very stoned. He was, of course, speaking of Jude.

“I agree,” JB had replied. And he did. None of them—not Willem, not Jude, not even Malcolm—had the families they deserved. But secretly, he made an exception for himself: He did have the family he deserved. They were wonderful, truly wonderful, and he knew it. And what’s more, he did deserve them.

“There’s my brilliant boy,” Yvette would call out whenever he walked into the house.
It had never had to occur to him that she was anything but completely correct.

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The day of the move, the elevator broke.

"Goddammit," Willem said. "I asked Annika about this. JB, do you have her number?"

But JB didn’t. "Oh well," said Willem. What good would texting Annika do, anyway? "I'm sorry, guys," he said to everyone, "we're going to have to take the stairs."

No one seemed to mind. It was a beautiful late-fall day, just-cold and dry and blustery, and there were eight of them to move not very many boxes and only a few pieces of furniture—Willem and JB and Jude and Malcolm and JB’s friend Richard and Willem’s friend Carolina and two friends of the four of theirs in common who were both named Henry Young, but whom everyone called Asian Henry Young and Black Henry Young in order to distinguish them.

Malcolm, who when you least expected it would prove himself an efficient manager, made the assignments. Jude would go up to the apartment and direct traffic and the placement of boxes. In between directing traffic, he would start unpacking the large items and breaking down the boxes. Carolina and Black Henry Young, who were both strong but short, would carry the boxes of books, since those were of a manageable size. Willem and JB and Richard would carry the furniture. And he and Asian Henry Young would take everything else. On every trip back downstairs, everyone should take down any boxes that Jude had flattened and stack them on the curb near the trash cans.

"Do you need help?" Willem asked Jude quietly as everyone began dividing up for their assignments.

"No," he said, shortly, and Willem watched him make his halting, slow-stepping way up the stairs, which were very steep and high, until he could no longer see him.

It was an easy move-in, brisk and undramatic, and after they’d all hung around for a bit, unpacking books and eating pizza, the others took off, to parties and bars, and Willem and Jude were finally left alone in their new apartment. The space was a mess, but the thought of putting things in their place was simply too tiring. And so they lin-
gered, surprised by how dark the afternoon had grown so quickly, and 
that they had someplace to live, someplace in Manhattan, someplace 
they could afford. They had both noticed the looks of politely main-
tained blankness on their friends’ faces as they saw their apartment for 
the first time (the room with its two narrow twin beds—“Like some-
thing out of a Victorian asylum” was how Willem had described it to 
Jude—had gotten the most comments), but neither of them minded: 
it was theirs, and they had a two-year lease, and no one could take it 
away from them. Here, they would even be able to save a little money, 
and what did they need more space for, anyway? Of course, they both 
craved beauty, but that would have to wait. Or rather, they would have 
to wait for it.

They were talking, but Jude’s eyes were closed, and Willem knew— 
from the constant, hummingbird-flutter of his eyelids and the way his 
hand was curled into a fist so tight that Willem could see the ocean-
green threads of his veins jumping under the back of his hand—that he 
was in pain. He knew from how rigid Jude was holding his legs, which 
were resting atop a box of books, that the pain was severe, and knew too 
that there was nothing he could do for him. If he said, “Jude, let me get 
you some aspirin,” Jude would say, “I’m fine, Willem, I don’t need any-
thing,” and if he said, “Jude, why don’t you lie down,” Jude would say, 
“Willem. I’m fine. Stop worrying.” So finally, he did what they had all 
learned over the years to do when Jude’s legs were hurting him, which 
was to make some excuse, get up, and leave the room, so Jude could 
lie perfectly still and wait for the pain to pass without having to make 
conversation or expend energy pretending that everything was fine and 
that he was just tired, or had a cramp, or whatever feeble explanation 
his was able to invent.

In the bedroom, Willem found the garbage bag with their sheets 
and made up first his futon and then Jude’s (which they had bought for 
very little from Carolina’s soon-to-be ex-girlfriend the week before). He 
sorted his clothes into shirts, pants, and underwear and socks, assigning 
each its own cardboard box (newly emptied of books), which he shoved 
beneath the bed. He left Jude’s clothes alone, but then moved into the 
bathroom, which he cleaned and disinfected before sorting and put-
ting away their toothpaste and soaps and razors and shampoos. Once 
or twice he paused in his work to creep out to the living room, where 
Jude remained in the same position, his eyes still closed, his hand still
balled, his head turned to the side so that Willem was unable to see his expression.

His feelings for Jude were complicated. He loved him—that part was simple—and feared for him, and sometimes felt as much his older brother and protector as his friend. He knew that Jude would be and had been fine without him, but he sometimes saw things in Jude that disturbed him and made him feel both helpless and, paradoxically, more determined to help him (although Jude rarely asked for help of any kind). They all loved Jude, and admired him, but he often felt that Jude had let him see a little more of him—just a little—than he had shown the others, and was unsure what he was supposed to do with that knowledge.

The pain in his legs, for example: as long as they had known him, they had known he had problems with his legs. It was hard not to know this, of course; he had used a cane through college, and when he had been younger—he was so young when they met him, a full two years younger than they, that he had still been growing—he had walked only with the aid of an orthopedic crutch, and had worn heavily strapped splint-like braces on his legs whose external pins, which were drilled into his bones, impaired his ability to bend his knees. But he had never complained, not once, although he had never begrudged anyone else’s complaining, either; their sophomore year, JB had slipped on some ice and fallen and broken his wrist, and they all remembered the hubbub that had followed, and JB’s theatrical moans and cries of misery, and how for a whole week after his cast was set he refused to leave the university infirmary, and had received so many visitors that the school newspaper had written a story about him. There was another guy in their dorm, a soccer player who had torn his meniscus and who kept saying that JB didn’t know what pain was, but Jude had gone to visit JB every day, just as Willem and Malcolm had, and had given him all the sympathy he had craved.

One night shortly after JB had deigned to be discharged from the clinic and had returned to the dorm to enjoy another round of attention, Willem had woken to find the room empty. This wasn’t so unusual, really: JB was at his boyfriend’s, and Malcolm, who was taking an astronomy class at Harvard that semester, was in the lab where he now slept every Tuesday and Thursday nights. Willem himself was often elsewhere, usually in his girlfriend’s room, but she had the flu
and he had stayed home that night. But Jude was always there. He had never had a girlfriend or a boyfriend, and he had always spent the night in their room, his presence beneath Willem’s bunk as familiar and constant as the sea.

He wasn’t sure what compelled him to climb down from his bed and stand for a minute, dopily, in the center of the quiet room, looking about him as if Jude might be hanging from the ceiling like a spider. But then he noticed his crutch was gone, and he began to look for him, calling his name softly in the common room, and then, when he got no answer, leaving their suite and walking down the hall toward the communal bathroom. After the dark of their room, the bathroom was nauseously bright, its fluorescent lights emitting their faint continual sizzle, and he was so disoriented that it came as less of a surprise than it should have when he saw, in the last stall, Jude’s foot sticking out from beneath the door, the tip of his crutch beside it.

“Jude?” he whispered, knocking on the stall door, and when there was no answer, “I’m coming in.” He pulled open the door and found Jude on the floor, one leg tucked up against his chest. He had vomited, and some of it had pooled on the ground before him, and some of it was scabbed on his lips and chin, a stippled apricot smear. His eyes were shut and he was sweaty, and with one hand he was holding the curved end of his crutch with an intensity that, as Willem would later come to recognize, comes only with extreme discomfort.

At the time, though, he was scared, and confused, and began asking Jude question after question, none of which he was in any state to answer, and it wasn’t until he tried to hoist Jude to his feet that Jude gave a shout and Willem understood how bad his pain was.

He somehow managed to half drag, half carry Jude to their room, and fold him into his bed and inexpertly clean him up. By this time the worst of the pain seemed to have passed, and when Willem asked him if he should call a doctor, Jude shook his head.

“But Jude,” he said, quietly, “you’re in pain. We have to get you help.”

“Nothing will help,” he said, and was silent for a few moments. “I just have to wait.” His voice was whispery and faint, unfamiliar.

“What can I do?” Willem asked.

“Nothing,” Jude said. They were quiet. “But Willem—will you stay with me for a little while?”
“Of course,” he said. Beside him, Jude trembled and shook as if chilled, and Willem took the comforter off his own bed and wrapped it around him. At one point he reached under the blanket and found Jude’s hand and prised open his fist so he could hold his damp, callused palm. It had been a long time since he had held another guy’s hand—not since his own brother’s surgery many years ago—and he was surprised by how strong Jude’s grip was, how muscular his fingers. Jude shuddered and chattered his teeth for hours, and eventually Willem lay down beside him and fell asleep.

The next morning, he woke in Jude’s bed with his hand throbbing, and when he examined the back of it he saw bruised smudges where Jude’s fingers had clenched him. He got up, a bit unsteadily, and walked into the common area, where he saw Jude reading at his desk, his features indistinguishable in the bright late-morning light.

He looked up when Willem came in and then stood, and for a while they merely looked at each other in silence.

“Willem, I’m so sorry,” Jude said at last.

“Jude,” he said, “there’s nothing to be sorry for.” And he meant it; there wasn’t.

But “I’m sorry, Willem, I’m so sorry,” Jude repeated, and no matter how many times Willem tried to reassure him, he wouldn’t be comforted.

“Just don’t tell Malcolm and JB, okay?” he asked him.

“I won’t,” he promised. And he never did, although in the end, it didn’t make a difference, for eventually, Malcolm and JB too would see him in pain, although only a few times in episodes as sustained as the one Willem witnessed that night.

He had never discussed it with Jude, but in the years to come, he would see him in all sorts of pain, big pains and little ones, would see him wince at small hurts and occasionally, when the discomfort was too profound, would see him vomit, or pleat to the ground, or simply blank out and become insensate, the way he was doing in their living room now. But although he was a man who kept his promises, there was a part of him that always wondered why he had never raised the issue with Jude, why he had never made him discuss what it felt like, why he had never dared to do what instinct told him to do a hundred times: to sit down beside him and rub his legs, to try to knead back into submission those misfiring nerve endings. Instead here he was hiding
in the bathroom, making busywork for himself as, a few yards away, one of his dearest friends sat alone on a disgusting sofa, making the slow, sad, lonely journey back to consciousness, back to the land of the living, without anyone at all by his side.

“You’re a coward,” he said to his reflection in the bathroom mirror. His face looked back at him, tired with disgust. From the living room, there was only silence, but Willem moved to stand unseen at its border, waiting for Jude to return to him.

“The place is a shithole,” JB had told Malcolm, and although he wasn’t wrong—the lobby alone made Malcolm’s skin prickle—he nevertheless returned home feeling melancholy, and wondering yet again whether continuing to live in his parents’ house was really preferable to living in a shithole of his own.

Logically, of course, he should absolutely stay where he was. He made very little money, and worked very long hours, and his parents’ house was large enough so that he could, in theory, never see them if he chose. Aside from occupying the entire fourth floor (which, to be honest, wasn’t much better than a shithole itself, it was so messy—his mother had stopped sending the housekeeper up to clean after Malcolm had yelled at her that Inez had broken one of his model houses), he had access to the kitchen, and the washing machine, and the full spectrum of papers and magazines that his parents subscribed to, and once a week he added his clothes to the drooping cloth bag that his mother dropped off at the dry cleaners on the way to her office and Inez picked up the following day. He was not proud of this arrangement, of course, nor of the fact that he was twenty-seven and his mother still called him at the office when she was ordering the week’s groceries to ask him if he would eat extra strawberries if she bought them, or to wonder whether he wanted char or bream for dinner that night.

Things would be easier, however, if his parents actually respected the same divisions of space and time that Malcolm did. Aside from expecting him to eat breakfast with them in the morning and brunch every Sunday, they also frequently dropped by his floor for a visit, preceding their social calls with a simultaneous knock and doorknob-turn that Malcolm had told them time and again defeated the purpose of
knocking at all. He knew this was a terribly bratty and ungrateful thing
to think, but at times he dreaded even coming home for the inevitable
small talk that he would have to endure before he was allowed to scrub
upstairs like a teenager. He especially dreaded life in the house without
Jude there; although the basement apartment had been more private
than his floor, his parents had also taken to blithely dropping by when
Jude was in residence, so that sometimes when Malcolm went down-
stairs to see Jude, there would be his father sitting in the basement
apartment already, lecturing Jude about something dull. His father in
particular liked Jude—he often told Malcolm that Jude had real intellec-
tual heft and depth, unlike his other friends, who were essentially
flibbertigibbets—and in his absence, it would be Malcolm whom his
father would regale with his complicated stories about the market, and
the shifting global financial realities, and various other topics about
which Malcolm didn’t much care. He in fact sometimes suspected that
his father would have preferred Jude for a son: He and Jude had gone to
the same law school. The judge for whom Jude had clerked had been
his father’s mentor at his first firm. And Jude was an assistant prosecutor
in the criminal division of the U.S. Attorney’s Office, the exact same
place his father had worked at when he was young.

“Mark my words: that kid is going places,” or “It’s so rare to meet
someone who’s going to be a truly self-made star at the start of their
career,” his father would often announce to Malcolm and his mother
after talking to Jude, looking pleased with himself, as if he was somehow
responsible for Jude’s genius, and in those moments Malcolm would
have to avoid looking at his mother’s face and the consoling expression
he knew it wore.

Things would also be easier if Flora were still around. When she
was preparing to leave, Malcolm had tried to suggest that he should be
her roommate in her new two-bedroom apartment on Bethune Street,
but she either genuinely didn’t understand his numerous hints or sim-
ply chose not to understand them. Flora had not seemed to mind the
excessive amount of time their parents demanded from them, which
had meant that he could spend more time in his room working on his
model houses and less time downstairs in the den, fidgeting through one
of his father’s interminable Ozu film festivals. When he was younger,
Malcolm had been hurt by and resentful of his father’s preference for
Flora, which was so obvious that family friends had commented on it.
“Fabulous Flora,” his father called her (or, at various points of her adolescence, “Feisty Flora,” “Ferocious Flora,” or “Fierce Flora,” though always with approval), and even today—even though Flora was practically thirty—he still took a special pleasure in her. “Fabulous said the wittiest thing today,” he’d say at dinner, as if Malcolm and his mother did not themselves talk to Flora on a regular basis, or, after a brunch downtown near Flora’s apartment, “Why did Fabulous have to move so far from us?” even though she was only a fifteen-minute car ride away. (Malcolm found this particularly galling, as his father was always telling him brocaded stories about how he had moved from the Grenadiers to Queens as a child and how he had forever after felt like a man trapped between two countries, and someday Malcolm too should go be an expat somewhere because it would really enrich him as a person and give him some much-needed perspective, etc., etc. And yet if Flora ever dared move off the island, much less to another country, Malcolm had no doubt that his father would fall apart.)

Malcolm himself had no nickname. Occasionally his father called him by other famous Malcolms’ last names—“X,” or “McLaren,” or “McDowell,” or “Muggeridge,” the last for whom Malcolm was supposedly named—but it always felt less like an affectionate gesture and more like a rebuke, a reminder of what Malcolm should be but clearly was not.

Sometimes—often—it seemed to Malcolm that it was silly for him to still worry, much less mope, about the fact that his father didn’t seem to like him very much. Even his mother said so. “You know Daddy doesn’t mean anything by it,” she’d say once in a while, after his father had delivered one of his soliloquies on Flora’s general superiority, and Malcolm—wanting to believe her, though also noting with irritation that his mother still referred to his father as “Daddy”—would grunt or mutter something to show her that he didn’t care one way or another. And sometimes—again, increasingly often—he would grow irritated that he spent so much time thinking about his parents at all. Was this normal? Wasn’t there something just a bit pathetic about it? He was twenty-seven, after all! Was this what happened when you lived at home? Or was it just him? Surely this was the best possible argument for moving out: so he’d somehow cease to be such a child. At night, as beneath him his parents completed their routines, the banging of the old pipes as they washed their faces and the sudden thunk into silence
as they turned down the living-room radiators better than any clock at indicating that it was eleven, eleven thirty, midnight, he made lists of what he needed to resolve, and fast, in the following year: his work (at a standstill), his love life (nonexistent), his sexuality (unresolved), his future (uncertain). The four items were always the same, although sometimes their order of priority changed. Also consistent was his ability to precisely diagnose their status, coupled with his utter inability to provide any solutions.

The next morning he’d wake determined: today he was going to move out and tell his parents to leave him alone. But when he’d get downstairs, there would be his mother, making him breakfast (his father long gone for work) and telling him that she was buying the tickets for their annual trip to St. Barts today, and could he let her know how many days he wanted to join them for? (His parents still paid for his vacations. He knew better than to ever mention this to his friends.)

“Yes, Ma,” he’d say. And then he’d eat his breakfast and leave for the day, stepping out into the world in which no one knew him, and in which he could be anyone.
At five p.m. every weekday and at eleven a.m. every weekend, JB got on the subway and headed for his studio in Long Island City. The weekday journey was his favorite: He’d board at Canal and watch the train fill and empty at each stop with an ever-shifting mix of different peoples and ethnicities, the car’s population reconstituting itself every ten blocks or so into provocative and improbable constellations of Poles, Chinese, Koreans, Senegalese; Senegalese, Dominicans, Indians, Pakistanis; Pakistanis, Irish, Salvadorans, Mexicans; Mexicans, Sri Lankans, Nigerians, and Tibetans—the only thing uniting them being their newness to America and their identical expressions of exhaustion, that blend of determination and resignation that only the immigrant possesses.

In these moments, he was both grateful for his own luck and sentimental about his city, neither of which he felt very often. He was not someone who celebrated his hometown as a glorious mosaic, and he made fun of people who did. But he admired—how could you not?—the collective amount of labor, real labor, that his trainmates had no doubt accomplished that day. And yet instead of feeling ashamed of his relative indolence, he was relieved.

The only other person he had ever discussed this sensation with, however elliptically, was Asian Henry Young. They had been riding out to Long Island City—it had been Henry who’d found him space in the studio, actually—when a Chinese man, slight and tendony and carrying a persimmon-red plastic bag that sagged heavily from the crook of
the last joint of his right index finger, as if he had no strength or will left to carry it any more declaratively, stepped on and slumped into the seat across from them, crossing his legs and folding his arms around himself and falling asleep at once. Henry, whom he'd known since high school and was, like him, a scholarship kid, and was the son of a seamstress in Chinatown, had looked at JB and mouthed, “There but for the grace of god,” and JB had understood exactly the particular mix of guilt and pleasure he felt.

The other aspect of those weekday-evening trips he loved was the light itself, how it filled the train like something living as the cars rattled across the bridge, how it washed the weariness from his seatmates’ faces and revealed them as they were when they first came to the country, when they were young and America seemed conquerable. He’d watch that kind light suffuse the car like syrup, watch it smudge furrows from foreheads, slick gray hairs into gold, gentle the aggressive shine from cheap fabrics into something lustrous and fine. And then the sun would drift, the car rattling uncaringly away from it, and the world would return to its normal sad shapes and colors, the people to their normal sad state, a shift as cruel and abrupt as if it had been made by a sorcerer’s wand.

He liked to pretend he was one of them, but he knew he was not. Sometimes there would be Haitians on the train, and he—his hearing, suddenly wolflike, distinguishing from the murmur around him the slurpy, singy sound of their Creole—would find himself looking toward them, to the two men with round faces like his father’s, or to the two women with soft snubbed noses like his mother’s. He always hoped that he might be presented with a completely organic reason to speak to them—maybe they’d be arguing about directions somewhere, and he might be able to insert himself and provide the answer—but there never was. Sometimes they would let their eyes scan across the seats, still talking to each other, and he would tense, ready his face to smile, but they never seemed to recognize him as one of their own.

Which he wasn’t, of course. Even he knew he had more in common with Asian Henry Young, with Malcolm, with Willem, or even with Jude, than he had with them. Just look at him: at Court Square he disembarked and walked the three blocks to the former bottle factory where he now shared studio space with three other people. Did real Haitians have studio space? Would it even occur to real Haitians to
leave their large rent-free apartment, where they could have theoretically carved out their own corner to paint and doodle, only to get on a subway and travel half an hour (think how much work could be accomplished in those thirty minutes!) to a sunny dirty space? No, of course not. To conceive of such a luxury, you needed an American mind.

The loft, which was on the third floor and accessed by a metal staircase that made bell-like rings whenever you stepped on it, was white-walled and white-floored, though the floors were so extravagantly splintered that in areas it looked like a shag rug had been laid down. There were tall old-fashioned casement windows punctuating every side, and these at least the four of them kept clean—each tenant was assigned one wall as his personal responsibility—because the light was too good to squander to dirt and was in fact the whole point of the space. There was a bathroom (unspeakable) and a kitchen (slightly less horrifying) and, standing in the exact center of the loft, a large slab of a table made from a piece of inferior marble placed atop three sawhorses. This was a common area, which anyone could use to work on a project that needed a little extra space, and over the months the marble had been streaked lilac and marigold and dropped with dots of precious cadmium red. Today the table was covered with long strips of various-colored hand-dyed organza, weighted down at either end with paperbacks, their tips fluttering in the ceiling fan’s whisk. A tented card stood at its center: DRYING. DO NOT MOVE. WILL CLEAN UP FIRST THING TOM’W P.M. TX 4 PATIENCE, H.Y.

There were no walls subdividing the space, but it had been split into four equal sections of five hundred square feet each by electrical tape, the blue lines demarcating not just the floor but also the walls and ceiling above each artist’s space. Everyone was hypervigilant about respecting one another’s territory; you pretended not to hear what was going on in someone else’s quarter, even if he was hissing to his girlfriend on his phone and you could of course hear every last word, and when you wanted to cross into someone’s space, you stood at the edge of the blue tape and called his name once, softly, and then only if you saw that he wasn’t deep in the zone, before asking permission to come over.

At five thirty, the light was perfect: buttery and dense and fat somehow, swelling the room as it had the train into something expansive and hopeful. He was the only one there. Richard, whose space was next to his, tended bar at nights and so spent his time at the studio in the morn-
ing, as did Ali, whose area he faced. That left Henry, whose space was diagonal from his and who usually arrived at seven, after he left his day job at the gallery. He took off his jacket, which he threw into his corner, uncovered his canvas, and sat on the stool before it, sighing.

This was JB’s fifth month in the studio, and he loved it, loved it more than he thought he would. He liked the fact that his studiomates were all real, serious artists; he could never have worked in Ezra’s place, not only because he believed what his favorite professor had once told him—that you should never paint where you fucked—but because to work in Ezra’s was to be constantly surrounded and interrupted by dilettantes. There, art was something that was just an accessory to a lifestyle. You painted or sculpted or made crappy installation pieces because it justified a wardrobe of washed-soft T-shirts and dirty jeans and a diet of ironic cheap American beers and ironic expensive hand-rolled American cigarettes. Here, however, you made art because it was the only thing you’d ever been good at, the only thing, really, you thought about between shorter bursts of thinking about the things everyone thought about: sex and food and sleep and friends and money and fame. But somewhere inside you, whether you were making out with someone in a bar or having dinner with your friends, was always your canvas, its shapes and possibilities floating embryonically behind your pupils. There was a period—or at least you hoped there was—with every painting or project when the life of that painting became more real to you than your everyday life, when you sat wherever you were and thought only of returning to the studio, when you were barely conscious that you had tapped out a hill of salt onto the dinner table and in it were drawing your plots and patterns and plans, the white grains moving under your fingertip like silt.

He liked too the specific and unexpected companionability of the place. There were times on the weekends when everyone was there at the same time, and at moments, he would emerge from the fog of his painting and sense that all of them were breathing in rhythm, panting almost, from the effort of concentrating. He could feel, then, the collective energy they were expending filling the air like gas, flammable and sweet, and would wish he could bottle it so that he might be able to draw from it when he was feeling uninspired, for the days in which he would sit in front of the canvas for literally hours, as though if he stared long enough, it might explode into something brilliant and charged.
He liked the ceremony of waiting at the edge of the blue tape and clearing his throat in Richard’s direction, and then crossing over the boundary to look at his work, the two of them standing before it in silence, needing to exchange only the fewest of words yet understanding exactly what the other meant. You spent so much time explaining yourself, your work, to others—what it meant, what you were trying to accomplish, why you were trying to accomplish it, why you had chosen the colors and subject matter and materials and application and technique that you had—that it was a relief to simply be with another person to whom you didn’t have to explain anything; you could just look and look, and when you asked questions, they were usually blunt and technical and literal. You could be discussing engines, or plumbing: a matter both mechanical and straightforward, for which there were only one or two possible answers.

They all worked in different mediums, so there was no competition, no fear of one video artist finding representation before his studio mate, and less fear that a curator would come in to look at your work and fall in love with your neighbor’s instead. And yet—and this was important—he respected everyone else’s work as well. Henry made what he called deconstructed sculptures, strange and elaborate ikebana arrangements of flowers and branches fashioned from various kinds of silk. After he’d finish a piece, though, he’d remove its chicken-wire butressing, so that the sculpture fell to the ground as a flat object and appeared as an abstract puddle of colors—only Henry knew what it looked like as a three-dimensional object.

Ali was a photographer who was working on a series called “The History of Asians in America,” for which he created a photograph to represent every decade of Asians in America since 1890. For each image, he made a different diorama representing an epochal event or theme in one of the three-foot-square pine boxes that Richard had built for him, which he populated with little plastic figures he bought at the craft store and painted, and trees and roads that he glazed from potter’s clay, and backdrops he rendered with a brush whose bristles were so fine they resembled eyelashes. He then shot the dioramas and made C-prints. Of the four of them, only Ali was represented, and he had a show in seven months about which the other three knew never to ask because any mention of it made him start bleating with anxiety. Ali wasn’t progressing in historical order—he had the two thousands
done (a stretch of lower Broadway thick with couples, all of whom were white men and, walking just a few steps behind them, Asian women), and the nineteen-eighties (a tiny Chinese man being beaten by two tiny white thugs with wrenches, the bottom of the box greased with varnish to resemble a parking lot’s rain-glossed tarmac), and was currently working on the nineteen-forties, for which he was painting a cast of fifty men, women, and children who were meant to be prisoners in the Tule Lake internment camp. Ali’s work was the most laborious of all of theirs, and sometimes, when they were procrastinating on their own projects, they would wander into Ali’s cube and sit next to him, and Ali, barely lifting his head from the magnifying mirror under which he held a three-inch figure on whom he was painting a herringbone skirt and saddle shoes, would hand them a snarl of steel wool that he needed shredded to resemble tumbleweeds, or some fine-gauge wire that he wanted punctuated with little ties so that it would look barbed.

But it was Richard’s work that JB admired the most. He was a sculptor too, but worked with only ephemeral materials. He’d draw on drafting paper impossible shapes, and then render them in ice, in butter, in chocolate, in lard, and film them as they vanished. He was gleeful about witnessing the disintegration of his works, but JB, watching just last month as a massive, eight-foot-tall piece Richard had made—a swooping sail-like batwing of frozen grape juice that resembled coagulated blood—dripped and then crumbled to its demise, had found himself unexpectedly about to cry, though whether from the destruction of something so beautiful or the mere everyday profundity of its disappearance, he was unable to say. Now Richard was less interested in substances that melted and more interested in substances that would attract decimators; he was particularly interested in moths, which apparently loved honey. He had a vision, he told JB, of a sculpture whose surface so writhed with moths that you couldn’t even see the shape of the thing they were devouring. The sills of his windows were lined with jars of honey, in which the porous combs floated like fetuses suspended in formaldehyde.

JB was the lone classicist among them. He painted. Worse, he was a figurative painter. When he had been in graduate school, no one really cared about figurative work: anything—video art, performance art, photography—was more exciting than painting, and truly anything was better than figurative work. “That’s the way it’s been since the nineteen-

fifties,” one of his professors had sighed when JB complained to him. “You know that slogan for the marines? ‘The few, the brave . . .’? That’s us, we lonely losers.”

It was not as if, over the years, he hadn’t attempted other things, other mediums (that stupid, fake, derivative Meret Oppenheim hair project! Could he have done anything cheaper? He and Malcolm had gotten into a huge fight, one of their biggest, when Malcolm had called the series “ersatz Lorna Simpson,” and of course the worst thing was that Malcolm had been completely right), but although he would never have admitted to anyone else that he felt there was something effete, girlish almost and at any rate certainly not gangster, about being a figurative painter, he had recently had to accept that it was what he was: he loved paint, and he loved portraiture, and that was what he was going to do.

So: Then what? He had known people—he knew people—who were, technically, much better artists than he was. They were better draftsmen, they had better senses of composition and color, they were more disciplined. But they didn’t have any ideas. An artist, as much as a writer or composer, needed themes, needed ideas. And for a long time, he simply didn’t have any. He tried to draw only black people, but a lot of people drew black people, and he didn’t feel he had anything new to add. He drew hustlers for a while, but that too grew dull. He drew his female relatives, but found himself coming back to the black problem. He began a series of scenes from Tintin books, with the characters portrayed realistically, as humans, but it soon felt too ironic and hollow, and he stopped. So he lazed from canvas to canvas, doing paintings of people on the street, of people on the subway, of scenes from Ezra’s many parties (these were the least successful; everyone at those gatherings were the sort who dressed and moved as if they were constantly being observed, and he ended up with pages of studies of posing girls and preening guys, all of their eyes carefully averted from his gaze), until one night, he was sitting in Jude and Willem’s depressing apartment on their depressing sofa, watching the two of them assemble dinner, negotiating their way through their miniature kitchen like a bustling lesbian couple. This had been one of the rare Sunday nights he wasn’t at his mother’s, because she and his grandmother and aunts were all on a tacky cruise in the Mediterranean that he had refused to go on. But he had grown accustomed to seeing people and having
dinner—a real dinner—made for him on Sundays, and so had invited himself over to Jude and Willem’s, both of whom he knew would be home because neither of them had any money to go out.

He had his sketch pad with him, as he always did, and when Jude sat down at the card table to chop onions (they had to do all their prep work on the table because there was no counter space in the kitchen), he began drawing him almost unthinkingly. From the kitchen came a great banging, and the smell of smoking olive oil, and when he went in to discover Willem whacking at a piece of butterflied chicken with the bottom of an omelet pan, his arm raised over the meat as if to spank it, his expression oddly peaceful, he drew him as well.

He wasn’t sure, then, that he was really working toward anything, but the next weekend, when they all went out to Pho Viet Huong, he brought along one of Ali’s old cameras and shot the three of them eating and then, later, walking up the street in the snow. They were moving particularly slowly in deference to Jude, because the sidewalks were slippery. He saw them lined up in the camera’s viewfinder: Malcolm, Jude, and Willem, Malcolm and Willem on either side of Jude, close enough (he knew, having been in the position himself) to catch him if he skidded but not so close that Jude would suspect that they were anticipating his fall. They had never had a conversation that they would do this, he realized; they had simply begun it.

He took the picture. “What’re you doing, JB?” asked Jude, at the same time as Malcolm complained, “Cut it out, JB.”

The party that night was on Centre Street, in the loft of an acquaintance of theirs, a woman named Mirasol whose twin, Phaedra, they knew from college. Once inside, everyone dispersed into their different subgroups, and JB, after waving at Richard across the room and not ignoring with irritation that Mirasol had provided a whole tableful of food, meaning that he’d just wasted fourteen dollars at Pho Viet Huong when he could’ve eaten here for free, found himself wandering toward where Jude was talking with Phaedra and some fat dude who might have been Phaedra’s boyfriend and a skinny bearded guy he recognized as a friend of Jude’s from work. Jude was perched on the back of one of the sofas, Phaedra next to him, and the two of them were looking up at the fat and skinny guys and all of them were laughing at something: He took the picture.

Normally at parties he grabbed or was grabbed by a group of people,
and spent the night as the nuclei for a variety of three- or foursomes, bounding from one to the next, gathering the gossip, starting harmless rumors, pretending to share confidences, getting others to tell him who they hated by divulging hatreds of his own. But this night, he traveled the room alert and purposeful and largely sober, taking pictures of his three friends as they moved in their own patterns, unaware that he was trailing them. At one point, a couple of hours in, he found them by the window with just one another, Jude saying something and the other two leaning in close to hear him, and then in the next moment, the three of them leaning back and all laughing, and although for a moment he felt both wistful and slightly jealous, he was also triumphant, as he had gotten both shots. *Tonight, I am a camera*, he told himself, and tomorrow I will be JB again.

In a way, he had never enjoyed a party more, and no one seemed to notice his deliberate rovings except for Richard, who, as the four of them were leaving an hour later to go uptown (Malcolm’s parents were in the country, and Malcolm thought he knew where his mother hid her weed), gave him an unexpectedly sweet old-man clap on the shoulder. “Working on something?”

“I think so.”

“Good for you.”

The next day he sat at his computer looking at the night’s images on the screen. The camera wasn’t a great one, and it had hazed every picture with a smoky yellow light, which, along with his poor focusing skills, had made everyone warm and rich and slightly soft-edged, as if they had been shot through a tumblerful of whiskey. He stopped at a close-up of Willem’s face, of him smiling at someone (a girl, no doubt) off camera, and at the one of Jude and Phaedra on the sofa: Jude was wearing a bright navy sweater that JB could never figure out belonged to him or to Willem, as both of them wore it so much, and Phaedra was wearing a wool dress the shade of port, and she was leaning her head toward his, and the dark of her hair made his look lighter, and the nubby teal of the sofa beneath them made them both appear shining and jewel-like, their colors just-licked and glorious, their skin delicious. They were colors anyone would want to paint, and so he did, sketching out the scene first in his book in pencil, and then again on stiffer board in watercolors, and then finally on canvas in acrylics.

That had been four months ago, and he now had almost eleven
paintings completed—an astonishing output for him—all of scenes from his friends’ lives. There was Willem waiting to audition, studying the script a final time, the sole of one boot pressed against the sticky red wall behind him; and Jude at a play, his face half shadowed, at the very second he smiled (getting that shot had almost gotten JB thrown out of the theater); Malcolm sitting stiffly on a sofa a few feet away from his father, his back straight and his hands clenching his knees, the two of them watching a Buñuel film on a television just out of frame. After some experimentation, he had settled on canvases the size of a standard C-print, twenty by twenty-four inches, all horizontally oriented, and which he imagined might someday be displayed in a long snaking single layer, one that would wrap itself around a gallery’s walls, each image following the next as fluidly as cells in a film strip. The renderings were realistic, but photo-realistic; he had never replaced Ali’s camera with a better one, and he tried to make each painting capture that gently fuzzed quality the camera gave everything, as if someone had patted away the top layer of clarity and left behind something kinder than the eye alone would see.

In his insecure moments, he sometimes worried the project was too fey, too inward—this was where having representation really helped, if only to remind you that someone liked your work, thought it important or at the very least beautiful—but he couldn’t deny the pleasure he got from it, the sense of ownership and contentment. At times he missed being part of the pictures himself; here was a whole narrative of his friends’ lives, his absence an enormous missing part, but he also enjoyed the godlike role he played. He got to see his friends differently, not as just appendages to his life but as distinct characters inhabiting their own stories; he felt sometimes that he was seeing them for the first time, even after so many years of knowing them.

About a month into the project, once he knew that this was what he was going to concentrate on, he’d of course had to explain to them why he kept following them around with a camera, shooting the mundane moments of their lives, and why it was crucial that they let him keep doing so and provide him with as much access as possible. They had been at dinner at a Vietnamese noodle shop on Orchard Street that they hoped might be a Pho Viet Huong successor, and after he’d made his speech—uncharacteristically nervous as he did so—they all found themselves looking toward Jude, who he’d known in advance would be
the problem. The other two would agree, but that didn’t help him. They all needed to say yes or it wouldn’t work, and Jude was by far the most self-conscious among them; in college, he turned his head or blocked his face whenever anyone tried to take his picture, and whenever he had smiled or laughed, he had reflexively covered his mouth with his hand, a tic that the rest of them had found upsetting, and which he had only learned to stop doing in the past few years.

As he’d feared, Jude was suspicious. “What would this involve?” he kept asking, and JB, summoning all his patience, had to reassure him numerous times that of course his goal wasn’t to humiliate or exploit him but only to chronicle in pictures the drip of all of their lives. The others said nothing, letting him do the work, and Jude finally consented, although he didn’t sound too happy about it.

“How long is this going to go on for?” Jude asked.

“Forever, I hope.” And he did. His one regret was that he hadn’t begun earlier, back when they were all young.

On the way out, he walked with Jude. “Jude,” he said quietly, so that the others couldn’t hear him. “Anything that involves you—I’ll let you see in advance. You veto it, and I’ll never show it.”

Jude looked at him. “Promise?”

“Swear to god.”

He regretted his offer the instant he made it, for the truth was that Jude was his favorite of the three of them to paint: He was the most beautiful of them, with the most interesting face and the most unusual coloring, and he was the shyest, and so pictures of him always felt more precious than ones of the others.

The following Sunday when he was back at his mother’s, he went through some of his boxes from college that he’d stored in his old bedroom, looking for a photograph he knew he had. Finally he found it: a picture of Jude from their first year that someone had taken and printed and which had somehow ended up in his possession. In it, Jude was standing in the living room of their suite, turned partway to the camera. His left arm was wrapped around his chest, so you could see the satiny starburst-shaped scar on the back of his hand, and in his right he was unconvincingly holding an unlit cigarette. He was wearing a blue-and-white-striped long-sleeved T-shirt that must not have been his, it was so big (although maybe it really was his; in those days, all of Jude’s clothes were too big because, as it later emerged, he intentionally bought them
oversized so he could wear them for the next few years, as he grew), and his hair, which he wore longish back then so he could hide behind it, fizzled off at his jawline. But the thing that JB had always remembered most about this photograph was the expression on Jude’s face: a wariness that in those days he was never without. He hadn’t looked at this picture in years, but doing so made him feel empty, for reasons he wasn’t quite able to articulate.

This was the painting he was working on now, and for it he had broken form and changed to a forty-inch-square canvas. He had experimented for days to get right that precise shade of tricky, serpentine green for Jude’s irises, and had redone the colors of his hair again and again before he was satisfied. It was a great painting, and he knew it, knew it absolutely the way you sometimes did, and he had no intention of ever showing it to Jude until it was hanging on a gallery wall somewhere and Jude would be powerless to do anything about it. He knew Jude would hate how fragile, how feminine, how vulnerable, how young it made him look, and knew too he would find lots of other imaginary things to hate about it as well, things JB couldn’t even begin to anticipate because he wasn’t a self-loathing nut job like Jude. But to him, it expressed everything about what he hoped this series would be: it was a love letter, it was a documentation, it was a saga, it was his. When he worked on this painting, he felt sometimes as if he were flying, as if the world of galleries and parties and other artists and ambitions had shrunk to a pinpoint beneath him, something so small he could kick it away from himself like a soccer ball, watch it spin off into some distant orbit that had nothing to do with him.

It was almost six. The light would change soon. For now, the space was still quiet around him, although distantly, he could hear the train rumbling by on its tracks. Before him, his canvas waited. And so he picked up his brush and began.

There was poetry on the subway. Above the rows of scooped-plastic seats, filling the empty display space between ads for dermatologists and companies that promised college degrees by mail, were long laminated sheets printed with poems: second-rate Stevens and third-rate Roethke
and fourth-rate Lowell, verse meant to agitate no one, anger and beauty reduced to empty aphorisms.

Or so JB always said. He was against the poems. They had appeared when he was in junior high, and for the past fifteen years he had been complaining about them. “Instead of funding real art and real artists, they’re giving money to a bunch of spinster librarians and cardigan fags to pick out this shit,” he shouted at Willem over the screech of the F train’s brakes. “And it’s all this Edna St. Vincent Millay–type shit. Or it’s actually good people they’ve neutered. And they’re all white, have you noticed that? What the fuck is up with that?”

The following week, Willem saw a Langston Hughes poster and called JB to tell him. “Langston Hughes?!” JB groaned. “Let me guess—’A Dream Deferred,’ right? I knew it! That shit doesn’t count. And anyway, if something really did explode, that shit’d be down in two seconds flat.”

Opposite Willem that afternoon is a Thom Gunn poem: “Their relationship consisted / In discussing if it existed.” Underneath, someone has written in black marker, “Dont worry man I cant get no pussy either.” He closes his eyes.

It’s not promising that he’s this tired and it’s only four, his shift not even begun. He shouldn’t have gone with JB to Brooklyn the previous night, but no one else would go with him, and JB claimed he owed him, because hadn’t he accompanied Willem to his friend’s horrible one-man show just last month?

So he’d gone, of course. “Whose band is this?” he’d asked as they waited on the platform. Willem’s coat was too thin, and he’d lost one of his gloves, and as a result he had begun assuming a heat-conserving posture—arms wrapped around his chest, hands folded into his armpits, rocking back on his heels—whenever he was forced to stand still in the cold.

“Joseph’s,” said JB.

“Oh,” he said. He had no idea who Joseph was. He admired JB’s Felliniesque command of his vast social circle, in which everyone was a colorfully costumed extra, and he and Malcolm and Jude were crucial but still lowly accessories to his vision—key grips or second art directors—whom he regarded as tacitly responsible for keeping the entire endeavor grinding along.

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“It’s hard core,” said JB pleasantly, as if that would help him place Joseph.
“What’s this band called?”
“Okay, here’s the thing,” JB said, grinning. “It’s called Smegma Cake 2.”
“What?” he asked, laughing. “Smegma Cake 2? Why? What happened to Smegma Cake 1?”
“It got a staph infection,” JB shouted over the noise of the train clattering into the station. An older woman standing near them scowled in their direction.

Unsurprisingly, Smegma Cake 2 wasn’t very good. It wasn’t even hard core, really; more ska-like, bouncy and meandering (“Something happened to their sound!” JB yelled into his ear during one of the more prolonged numbers, “Phantom Snatch 3000.” “Yeah,” he yelled back, “it sucks!”). Midway through the concert (each song seeming to last twenty minutes) he grew giddy, at both the absurdity of the band and the crammedness of the space, and began ineptly moshing with JB, the two of them sproinging off their neighbors and bystanders until everyone was crashing into one another, but cheerfully, like a bunch of tipsy toddlers. JB catching him by the shoulders and the two of them laughing into each other’s faces. It was in these moments that he loved JB completely, his ability and willingness to be wholly silly and frivolous, which he could never be with Malcolm or Jude—Malcolm because he was, for all his talk otherwise, interested in propriety, and Jude because he was serious.

Of course, this morning he had suffered. He woke in JB’s corner of Ezra’s loft, on JB’s unmade mattress (nearby, on the floor, JB himself snored juicily into a pile of peaty-smelling laundry), unsure how, exactly, they’d gotten back over the bridge. Willem wasn’t normally a drinker or a stoner, but around JB he occasionally found himself behaving otherwise. It had been a relief to return to Lispenard Street, its quiet and clean, the sunlight that baked his side of the bedroom hot and loafty between eleven a.m. and one p.m. already slanting through the window, Jude long gone for the day. He set his alarm and fell instantly asleep, waking with enough time only to shower and swallow an aspirin before hurrying to the train.

The restaurant where he worked had made its reputation on both its food—which was complicated without being challenging—and
the consistency and approachability of its staff. At Ortolan they were taught to be warm but not familiar, accessible but not informal. “It’s not Friendly’s,” his boss, Findlay, the restaurant’s general manager, liked to say. “Smile, but don’t tell people your name.” There were lots of rules such as these at Ortolan: Women employees could wear their wedding rings, but no other jewelry. Men shouldn’t wear their hair longer than the bottom of their earlobes. No nail polish. No more than two days’ worth of beard. Mustaches were to be tolerated on a case-by-case basis, as were tattoos.

Willem had been a waiter at Ortolan for almost two years. Before Ortolan, he had worked the weekend brunch and weekday lunch shift at a loud and popular restaurant in Chelsea called Digits, where the customers (almost always men, almost always older: forty, at least) would ask him if he was on the menu, and then laugh, naughty and pleased with themselves, as if they were the first people to ever ask him that, instead of the eleventh or twelfth that shift alone. Even so, he always smiled and said, “Only as an appetizer,” and they’d retort, “But I want an entrée,” and he would smile again and they would tip him well at the end.

It had been a friend of his from graduate school, another actor named Roman, who’d recommended him to Findlay after he’d booked a recurring guest role on a soap opera and had quit. (He was conflicted about accepting the gig, he told Willem, but what could he do? It was too much money to refuse.) Willem had been glad for the referral, because besides its food and service, the other thing that Ortolan was known for—albeit among a much smaller group of people—was its flexible hours, especially if Findlay liked you. Findlay liked small flat-chested brunette women and all sorts of men as long as they were tall and thin and, it was rumored, not Asian. Sometimes Willem would stand on the edge of the kitchen and watch as mismatched pairs of tiny dark-haired waitresses and long skinny men circled through the main dining room, skating past one another in a weirdly cast series of minuets.

Not everyone who waited at Ortolan was an actor. Or to be more precise, not everyone at Ortolan was still an actor. There were certain restaurants in New York where one went from being an actor who waited tables to, somehow, being a waiter who was once an actor. And if the restaurant was good enough, respected enough, that was not only
a perfectly acceptable career transition, it was a preferable one. A waiter at a well-regarded restaurant could get his friends a coveted reservation, could charm the kitchen staff into sending out free dishes to those same friends (though as Willem learned, charming the kitchen staff was less easy than he’d thought it would be). But what could an actor who waited tables get his friends? Tickets to yet another off-off-Broadway production for which you had to supply your own suit because you were playing a stockbroker who may or may not be a zombie, and yet there was no money for costumes? (He’d had to do exactly that last year, and because he didn’t have a suit of his own, he’d had to borrow one of Jude’s. Jude’s legs were about an inch longer than his, and so for the duration of the run he’d had to fold the pants legs under and stick them in place with masking tape.)

It was easy to tell who at Ortolan was once an actor and was now a career waiter. The careerists were older, for one, and precise and fussy about enforcing Findlay’s rules, and at staff dinners they would ostentatiously swirl the wine that the sommelier’s assistant poured them to sample and say things like, “It’s a little like that Linne Calodo Petite Sirah you served last week, José, isn’t it?” or “Tastes a little minerally, doesn’t it? This a New Zealand?” It was understood that you didn’t ask them to come to your productions—you only asked your fellow actor-waiters, and if you were asked, it was considered polite to at least try to go—and you certainly didn’t discuss auditions, or agents, or anything of the sort with them. Acting was like war, and they were veterans: they didn’t want to think about the war, and they certainly didn’t want to talk about it with naïfs who were still eagerly dashing toward the trenches, who were still excited to be in-country.

Findlay himself was a former actor, but unlike the other former actors, he liked to—or perhaps “liked” was not the word; perhaps the more accurate word would be simply “did”—talk about his past life, or at least a certain version of it. According to Findlay, he had once almost, almost booked the second lead in the Public Theater production of A Bright Room Called Day (later, one of the waitresses had told them that all of the significant roles in the play were for women). He understudied a part on Broadway (for what production was never made clear). Findlay was a walking career memento mori, a cautionary tale in a gray wool suit, and the still-actors either avoided him,
as if his particular curse were something contagious, or studied him closely, as if by remaining in contact with him, they could inoculate themselves.

But at what point had Findlay decided he would give up acting, and how had it happened? Was it simply age? He was, after all, old: forty-five, fifty, somewhere around there. How did you know that it was time to give up? Was it when you were thirty-eight and still hadn’t found an agent (as they suspected had happened to Joel)? Was it when you were forty and still had a roommate and were making more as a part-time waiter than you had made the year you decided to be a full-time actor (as they knew had happened to Kevin)? Was it when you got fat, or bald, or got bad plastic surgery that couldn’t disguise the fact that you were fat and bald? When did pursuing your ambitions cross the line from brave into foolhardy? How did you know when to stop? In earlier, more rigid, less encouraging (and ultimately, more helpful) decades, things would be much clearer: you would stop when you turned forty, or when you got married, or when you had kids, or after five years, or ten years, or fifteen. And then you would go get a real job, and acting and your dreams for a career in it would recede into the evening, a melting into history as quiet as a briquette of ice sliding into a warm bath.

But these were days of self-fulfillment, where settling for something that was not quite your first choice of a life seemed weak-willed and ignoble. Somewhere, surrendering to what seemed to be your fate had changed from being dignified to being a sign of your own cowardice. There were times when the pressure to achieve happiness felt almost oppressive, as if happiness were something that everyone should and could attain, and that any sort of compromise in its pursuit was somehow your fault. Would Willem work for year upon year at Ortolan, catching the same trains to auditions, reading again and again and again, one year maybe caterpillaring an inch or two forward, his progress so minute that it hardly counted as progress at all? Would he some day have the courage to give up, and would he be able to recognize that moment, or would he wake one day and look in the mirror and find himself an old man, still trying to call himself an actor because he was too scared to admit that he might not be, might never be?

According to JB, the reason Willem wasn’t yet successful was because of Willem. One of JB’s favorite lectures to him began with
“If I had your looks, Willem,” and ended with, “And now you’ve been so fucking spoiled by things coming to you so easily that you think everything’s just going to happen for you. And you know what, Willem? You’re good-looking, but everyone here is good-looking, and you’re just going to have to try harder.”

Even though he thought this was sort of ironic coming from JB (Spoiled? Look at JB’s family, all of them clucking after him, pushing on him his favorite foods and just-ironed shirts, surrounding him in a cloud of compliments and affection; he once overheard JB on the phone telling his mother he needed her to get him more underwear, and that he’d pick it up when he went to see her for Sunday dinner, for which, by the way, he wanted short ribs), he understood what he meant as well. He knew he wasn’t lazy, but the truth was that he lacked the sort of ambition that JB and Jude had, that grim, trudging determination that kept them at the studio or office longer than anyone else, that gave them that slightly faraway look in their eyes that always made him think a fraction of them was already living in some imagined future, the contours of which were crystallized only to them. JB’s ambition was fueled by a lust for that future, for his speedy arrival to it; Jude’s, he thought, was motivated more by a fear that if he didn’t move forward, he would somehow slip back to his past, the life he had left and about which he would tell none of them. And it wasn’t only Jude and JB who possessed this quality: New York was populated by the ambitious. It was often the only thing that everyone here had in common.

Ambition and atheism: “Ambition is my only religion,” JB had told him late one beery night, and although to Willem this line sounded a little too practiced, like he was rehearsing it, trying to perfect its careless, throwaway tone before he someday got to say it for real to an interviewer somewhere, he also knew that JB was sincere. Only here did you feel compelled to somehow justify anything short of rabidity for your career; only here did you have to apologize for having faith in something other than yourself.

The city often made him feel he was missing something essential, and that that ignorance would forever doom him to a life at Ortolan. (He had felt this in college as well, where he knew absolutely that he was the dumbest person in their class, admitted as a sort of unofficial poor-white-rural-dweller-oddity affirmative-action representative.) The
others, he thought, sensed this as well, although it seemed to truly bother only JB.

“I don’t know about you sometimes, Willem,” JB once said to him, in a tone that suggested that what he didn’t know about Willem wasn’t good. This was late last year, shortly after Merritt, Willem’s former roommate, had gotten one of the two lead roles in an off-Broadway revival of *True West*. The other lead was being played by an actor who had recently starred in an acclaimed independent film and was enjoying that brief moment of possessing both downtown credibility and the promise of more mainstream success. The director (someone Willem had been longing to work with) had promised he’d cast an unknown as the second lead. And he had: it was just that the unknown was Merritt and not Willem. The two of them had been the final contenders for the part.

His friends had been outraged on his behalf. “But Merritt doesn’t even know how to act!” JB had groaned. “He just stands onstage and sparkles and thinks that’s enough!” The three of them had started talking about the last thing they had seen Merritt in—an all-male off-off-Broadway production of *La Traviata* set in nineteen-eighties Fire Island (Violetta—played by Merritt—had been renamed Victor, and he had died of AIDS, not tuberculosis)—and they all agreed it had been barely watchable.

“Well, he *does* have a good look,” he’d said, in a weak attempt to defend his absent former roommate.

“He’s not *that* good-looking,” Malcolm said, with a vehemence that surprised all of them.

“Willem, it’ll happen,” Jude consoled him on the way back home after dinner. “If there’s any justice in the world, it’ll happen. That director’s an imbecile.” But Jude never blamed Willem for his failings; JB always did. He wasn’t sure which was less helpful.

He had been grateful for their anger, naturally, but the truth was, he didn’t think Merritt was as bad as they did. He was certainly no worse than Willem himself; in fact, he was probably better. Later, he’d told this to JB, who responded with a long silence, stuffed with disapproval, before he started lecturing Willem. “I don’t know about you sometimes, Willem,” he began. “Sometimes I get the sense you don’t even really want to be an actor.”
“That’s not true,” he’d protested. “It’s just that I don’t think that every rejection is meaningless, and I don’t think everyone who gets a job over me does so out of dumb luck.”

There had been another silence. “You’re too kind, Willem,” JB said, darkly. “You’re never going to get anywhere like this.”

“Thanks, JB,” he’d said. He was rarely offended by JB’s opinions—often, he was right—but at that particular moment, he didn’t much feel like hearing JB’s thoughts on his shortcomings and his gloomy predictions about his future unless he completely changed his personality. He’d gotten off the phone and had lain in bed awake, feeling stuck and sorry for himself.

Anyway, changing his personality seemed basically out of the question—wasn’t it too late? Before he was a kind man, after all, Willem had been a kind boy. Everyone had noticed: his teachers, his classmates, the parents of his classmates. “Willem is such a compassionate child,” his teachers would write on his report cards, report cards his mother or father would look at once, briefly and wordlessly, before adding them to the stacks of newspapers and empty envelopes that they’d take to the recycling center. As he grew older, he had begun to realize that people were surprised, even upset, by his parents; a high-school teacher had once blurted to him that given Willem’s temperament, he had thought his parents would be different.

“Different how?” he’d asked.

“Friendlier,” his teacher had said.

He didn’t think of himself as particularly generous or unusually good-spirited. Most things came easily to him: sports, school, friends, girls. He wasn’t nice, necessarily; he didn’t seek to be everyone’s friend, and he couldn’t tolerate boors, or pettiness, or meanness. He was humble and hardworking, diligent, he knew, rather than brilliant. “Know your place,” his father often said to him.

His father did. Willem remembered once, after a late-spring freeze had killed off a number of new lambs in their area, his father being interviewed by a newspaper reporter who was writing a story about how it had affected the local farms.

“As a rancher,” the reporter began, when Willem’s father had stopped her.

“Not a rancher,” he’d said, his accent making these words, as all words, sound brusquer than they should, “a ranch hand.” He was cor-
rect, of course; a rancher meant something specific—a landowner—and by that definition, he wasn’t a rancher. But there were plenty of other people in the county who then also had no right to call themselves ranchers and yet did so anyway. Willem had never heard his father say that they shouldn’t—his father didn’t care what anyone else did or didn’t do—but such inflation was not for him, or for his wife, Willem’s mother.

Perhaps because of this, he felt he always knew who and what he was, which is why, as he moved farther and then further away from the ranch and his childhood, he felt very little pressure to change or reinvent himself. He was a guest at his college, a guest in graduate school, and now he was a guest in New York, a guest in the lives of the beautiful and the rich. He would never try to pretend he was born to such things, because he knew he wasn’t; he was a ranch hand’s son from western Wyoming, and his leaving didn’t mean that everything he had once been was erased, written over by time and experiences and the proximity to money.

He was his parents’ fourth child, and the only one still alive. First there had been a girl, Britte, who had died of leukemia when she was two, long before Willem had been born. This had been in Sweden, when his father, who was Icelandic, had been working at a fish farm, where he had met his mother, who was Danish. Then there had been a move to America, and a boy, Hemming, who had been born with cerebral palsy. Three years later, there had been another boy, Aksel, who had died in his sleep as an infant for no apparent reason.

Hemming was eight when Willem was born. He couldn’t walk or speak, but Willem had loved him and had never thought of him as anything but his older brother. Hemming could smile, however, and as he did, he’d bring his hand up toward his face, his fingers shaping themselves into a duck’s bill claw, his lips pulling back from his azalea-pink gums. Willem learned to crawl, and then walk and run—Hemming remaining in his chair year after year—and when he was old and strong enough, he would push Hemming’s heavy chair with its fat, stubborn tires (this was a chair meant to be sedentary, not to be nosed through grasses or down dirt roads) around the ranch where they lived with their parents in a small wooden house. Up the hill from them was the main house, long and low with a deep wraparound porch, and down the hill from them were the stables where their parents spent their days. He had
been Hemming’s primary caretaker, and companion, all through high school; in the mornings, he was the first one awake, making his parents’ coffee and boiling water for Hemming’s oatmeal, and in the evenings, he waited by the side of the road for the van that would drop his brother off after his day at the assisted-living center an hour’s drive away. Willem always thought they clearly looked like brothers—they had their parents’ light, bright hair, and their father’s gray eyes, and both of them had a groove, like an elongated parentheses, bracketing the left side of their mouths that made them appear easily amused and ready to smile—but no one else seemed to notice this. They saw only that Hemming was in a wheelchair, and that his mouth remained open, a damp red ellipse, and that his eyes, more often than not, drifted skyward, fixed on some cloud only he could see.

“What do you see, Hemming?” he sometimes asked him, when they were out on their night walks, but of course Hemming never answered him. Their parents were efficient and competent with Hemming, but not, he recognized, particularly affectionate. When Willem was kept late at school because of a football game, or a track meet, or when he was needed to work an extra shift at the grocery store, it was his mother who waited for Hemming at the end of the drive, who hefted Hemming into and then out of his bath, who fed him his dinner of chicken-and-rice porridge and changed his diaper before putting him to bed. But she didn’t read to him, or talk to him, or go on walks with him the way Willem did. Watching his parents around Hemming bothered him, in part because although they never behaved objectionably, he could tell that they viewed Hemming as their responsibility but no more. Later he would argue with himself that that was all that could reasonably be expected of them; anything else would be luck. But still. He wished they loved Hemming more, just a little more.

(Although maybe love was too much to ask from his parents. They had lost so many children that perhaps they simply either wouldn’t or couldn’t surrender themselves wholly to the ones they now had. Eventually, both he and Hemming would leave them too, by choice or not, and then their losses would be complete. But it would be decades before he was able to see things this way.)

His second year of college, Hemming had had to have an emergency appendectomy. “They said they caught it just in time,” his mother
told him over the phone. Her voice was flat, very matter-of-fact; there was no relief in it, no anguish, but neither was there any—and he’d had to make himself consider this, even though he hadn’t wanted to, was scared to—disappointment either. Hemming’s caregiver (a local woman, paid to watch him during the night now that Willem was gone) had noticed him pawing at his stomach and moaning, and had been able to diagnose the hard truffley lump under his abdomen for what it was. While Hemming was being operated on, the doctors had found a growth, a few centimeters long, on his large intestine and had biopsied it. X-rays had revealed further growths, and they were going to excise those as well.

“I’ll come home,” he said.

“No,” his mother had said. “You can’t do anything here. We’ll tell you if it’s anything serious.” She and his father had been more bemused than anything when he had been admitted to college—neither of them had known he was applying—but now that he was there, they were determined that he should graduate and forget the ranch as quickly as possible.

But at night he thought of Hemming, alone in a hospital bed, how he’d be frightened and would cry and listen for the sound of his voice. When Hemming was twenty-one, he’d had to have a hernia removed, and he had wept until Willem held his hand. He knew he’d have to go back.

The flights were expensive, much more than he’d anticipated. He researched bus routes, but it would take three days to get there, three days to get back, and he had midterm exams he had to take and do well in if he was to keep his scholarship, and his jobs to attend to. Finally, drunk that Friday night, he confided in Malcolm, who got out his checkbook and wrote him a check.

“I can’t,” he said, immediately.

“Why not?” asked Malcolm. They argued back and forth until Willem finally accepted the check.

“I’ll pay you back, you know that, right?”

Malcolm shrugged. “There’s no way for me to say this without sounding like a complete asshole,” he said, “but it doesn’t make a difference to me, Willem.”

Still, it became important to him to repay Malcolm somehow, even though he knew Malcolm wouldn’t accept his money. It was Jude who
had the idea of putting the money directly into Malcolm’s wallet, and so every two weeks after he’d cashed his check from the restaurant where he worked on the weekends, he’d stuff two or three twenties into it while Malcolm was asleep. He never quite knew if Malcolm noticed—he spent it so quickly, and often on the three of them—but Willem took some satisfaction and pride in doing it.

In the meantime, though, there was Hemming. He was glad he went home (his mother had only sighed when he told her he was coming), and glad to see Hemming, although alarmed by how thin he had become, how he groaned and cried as the nurses prodded the area around his sutures; he’d had to grab the sides of his chair to keep himself from shouting at them. At nights, he and his parents would have silent meals; he could almost feel them pulling away, as if they were unpeeling themselves from their lives as parents of two children and readying themselves to drift toward a new identity elsewhere.

On his third night, he took the keys to the truck to drive to the hospital. Back east, it was early spring, but here the dark air seemed to glitter with frost, and in the morning the grass was capped with a thin skin of crystals.

His father came onto the porch as he was walking down the steps. “He’ll be asleep,” he said.

“I just thought I’d go,” Willem told him.

His father looked at him. “Willem,” he said, “he won’t know whether you’re there or not.”

He felt his face go hot. “I know you don’t fucking care about him,” he snapped at him, “but I do.” It was the first time he’d ever sworn at his father, and he was unable to move for a moment, fearful and half excited that his father might react, that they might have an argument. But his father just took a sip from his coffee and then turned and went inside, the screen door smacking softly shut behind him.

For the rest of his visit they were all the same as they always were; they went in shifts to sit with Hemming, and when he wasn’t at the hospital, Willem helped his mother with the ledgers, or his father as he oversaw the reshedding of the horses. At nights he returned to the hospital and did schoolwork. He read aloud from The Decameron to Hemming, who stared at the ceiling and blinked, and struggled through his calculus, which he finally finished with the unhappy certainty that he
had gotten all of it wrong. The three of them had gotten used to Jude doing their calculus for them, working through the problems as quickly as if he were running arpeggios. Their first year, Willem had genuinely wanted to understand it, and Jude had sat with him for a string of nights, explaining again and again, but he had never been able to comprehend it.

“T’m just too stupid to get this,” he’d said after what felt like an hours-long session, at the end of which he had wanted to go outside and run for miles, he was so prickly with impatience and frustration.

Jude had looked down. “You’re not stupid,” he said, quietly. “I’m just not explaining it well enough.” Jude took seminars in pure math that you had to be invited to enroll in; the rest of them couldn’t even begin to fathom what, exactly, he did in it.

In retrospect, he was surprised only by his own surprise when his mother called three months later to tell him that Hemming was on life support. This was in late May, and he was halfway through his final exams. “Don’t come back,” she’d told him, commanded him, almost. “Don’t, Willem.” He spoke with his parents in Swedish, and it wasn’t until many years later, when a Swedish director he was working with pointed out how affectless his voice became when he switched into the language, that he recognized that he had unconsciously learned to adopt a certain tone when he talked to his parents, one emotionless and blunt, that was meant to echo their own.

Over the next few days he fretted, did poorly in his exams: French, comparative literature, Jacobean drama, the Icelandic sagas, the hated calculus all slurring into one. He picked a fight with his girlfriend, who was a senior and graduating. She cried; he felt guilty but also unable to repair the situation. He thought of Wyoming, of a machine coughing life into Hemming’s lungs. Shouldn’t he go back? He had to go back. He wouldn’t be able to stay for long: on June fifteenth, he and Jude were moving into a sublet off-campus for the summer—they’d both found jobs in the city, Jude working on weekdays as a classics professor’s amanuensis and on weekends at the bakery he worked at during the school year, Willem as a teacher’s assistant at a program for disabled children—but before then, the four of them were going to stay at Malcolm’s parents’ house in Aquinnah, on Martha’s Vineyard, after which Malcolm and JB would drive back to New York. At nights, he called
Hemming at the hospital, made his parents or one of the nurses hold the phone up to his ear, and spoke to his brother, even though he knew he probably couldn’t hear him. But how could he not have tried?

And then, one morning a week later, his mother called: Hemming had died. There was nothing he could say. He couldn’t ask why she hadn’t told him how serious the situation had been, because some part of him had known she wouldn’t. He couldn’t say he wished he had been there, because she would have nothing to say in response. He couldn’t ask her how she felt, because nothing she said would be enough. He wanted to scream at his parents, to hit them, to elicit from them *something*—some melting into grief, some loss of composure, some recognition that something large had happened, that in Hemming’s death they had lost something vital and necessary to their lives. He didn’t care if they really felt that way or not: he just needed them to say it, he needed to feel that something lay beneath their imperturbable calm, that somewhere within them ran a thin stream of quick, cool water, teeming with delicate lives, minnows and grasses and tiny white flowers, all tender and easily wounded and so vulnerable you couldn’t see them without aching for them.

He didn’t tell his friends, then, about Hemming. They went to Malcolm’s house—a beautiful place, the most beautiful place Willem had ever seen, much less stayed in—and late at night, when the others were asleep, each in his own bed, in his own room with his own bathroom (the house was that big), he crept outside and walked the web of roads surrounding the house for hours, the moon so large and bright it seemed made of something liquid and frozen. On those walks, he tried very hard not to think of anything in particular. He concentrated instead on what he saw before him, noticing at night what had eluded him by day: how the dirt was so fine it was almost sand, and puffed up into little plumes as he stepped in it, how skinny threads of bark-brown snakes whipsawed silently beneath the brush as he passed. He walked to the ocean and above him the moon disappeared, concealed by tattered rags of clouds, and for a few moments he could only hear the water, not see it, and the sky was thick and warm with moisture, as if the very air here were denser, more significant.

Maybe this is what it is to be dead, he thought, and realized it wasn’t so bad after all, and felt better.

He expected it would be awful to spend his summer around people
who might remind him of Hemming, but it was actually pleasant, helpful even. His class had seven students, all around eight years old, all severely impaired, none very mobile, and although part of the day was ostensibly devoted to trying to teach them colors and shapes, most of the time was spent playing with them: reading to them, pushing them around the grounds, tickling them with feathers. During recess all the classrooms opened their doors to the school’s central courtyard, and the space filled with children on such a variety of wheeled contraptions and vessels and vehicles that it sometimes sounded as if it was populated by mechanical insects, all of them squeaking and whirring and clucking at once. There were children in wheelchairs, and children on small, scaled-down mopeds that putted and clicked along the flagstones at a tortoise’s speed, and children strapped prone atop smooth lengths of wood that resembled abbreviated surfboards on wheels, and who pulled themselves along the ground with their elbowed stumps, and a few children with no means of conveyance at all, who sat in their minders’ laps, the backs of their necks cupped in their minders’ palms. Those were the ones who reminded him most keenly of Hemming.

Some of the children on the motorcycles and the wheeled boards could speak, and he would toss, very gently, large foam balls to them and organize races around the courtyard. He would always begin these races at the head of the pack, loping with an exaggerated slowness (though not so exaggerated that he appeared too broadly comic; he wanted them to think he was actually trying), but at some point, usually a third of the way around the square, he would pretend to trip on something and fall, spectacularly, to the ground, and all the kids would pass him and laugh. “Get up, Willem, get up!” they’d cry, and he would, but by that point they would have finished the lap and he would come in last place. He wondered, sometimes, if they envied him the dexterity of being able to fall and get up again, and if so, if he should stop doing it, but when he asked his supervisor, he had only looked at Willem and said that the kids thought he was funny and that he should keep falling. And so every day he fell, and every afternoon, when he was waiting with the students for their parents to come pick them up, the ones who could speak would ask him if he was going to fall the next day. “No way,” he’d say, confidently, as they giggled. “Are you kidding? How clumsy do you think I am?”

It was, in many ways, a good summer. The apartment was near
MIT and belonged to Jude’s math professor, who was in Leipzig for the season, and who was charging them such a negligible rent that the two of them found themselves making small repairs to the place in order to express their gratitude: Jude organized the books that were stacked into quavering, precarious skyscrapers on every surface and spackled a section of wall that had gone puddingy with water damage; Willem tightened doorknobs, replaced a leaky washer, changed the ballcock in the toilet. He started hanging out with another of the teacher’s aides, a girl who went to Harvard, and some nights she would come over to the house and the three of them would make large pots of spaghetti alle vongole and Jude would tell them about his days with the professor, who had decided to communicate with Jude in only Latin or ancient Greek, even when his instructions were things like, “I need more binder clips,” or “Make sure you get an extra shot of soy milk in my cappuccino tomorrow morning.” In August, their friends and acquaintances from college (and from Harvard, and MIT, and Wellesley, and Tufts) started drifting back to the city, and stayed with them for a night or two until they could move into their own apartments and dorm rooms. One evening toward the end of their stay, they invited fifty people up to the roof and helped Malcolm make a sort of clambake on the grill, blanketing ears of corn and mussels and clams under heaps of dampened banana leaves; the next morning the four of them scooped up the shells from the floor, enjoying the castanetly clatter they made as they were tossed into trash bags.

But it was also that summer that he realized he wouldn’t go home again, that somehow, without Hemming, there was no point in him and his parents pretending they needed to stay together. He suspected they felt the same way; there was never any conversation about this, but he never felt any particular need to see them again, and they never asked him. They spoke every now and again, and their conversations were, as always, polite and factual and dutiful. He asked them about the ranch, they asked him about school. His senior year, he got a role in the school’s production of *The Glass Menagerie* (he was cast as the gentleman caller, of course), but he never mentioned it to them, and when he told them that they shouldn’t bother to come east for graduation, they didn’t argue with him: it was nearing the end of foal season anyway, and he wasn’t sure they would have been able to come even if he hadn’t excused them. He and Jude had been adopted by Malcolm’s
and JB's families for the weekend, and when they weren't around, there were plenty of other people to invite them to their celebratory lunches and dinners and outings.

“But they're your parents,” Malcolm said to him once a year or so. “You can't just stop talking to them.” But you could, you did: he was proof of that. It was like any relationship, he felt—it took constant pruning, and dedication, and vigilance, and if neither party wanted to make the effort, why wouldn't it wither? The only thing he missed—besides Hemming—was Wyoming itself, its extravagant flatness, its trees so deeply green they looked blue, the sugar-and-turd apple-and-peat smell of a horse after it had been rubbed down for the night.

When he was in graduate school, they died, in the same year: his father of a heart attack in January, his mother of a stroke the following October. Then he had gone home—his parents were older, but he had forgotten how vivid, how tireless, they had always been, until he saw how diminished they had become. They had left everything to him, but after he had paid off their debts—and then he was unsettled anew, for all along he had assumed most of Hemming's care and medical treatments had been covered by insurance, only to learn that four years after his death, they were still writing enormous checks to the hospital every month—there was very little left: some cash, some bonds; a heavy-bottomed silver mug that had been his long-dead paternal grandfather's; his father's bent wedding ring, worn smooth and shiny and pale; a black-and-white portrait of Hemming and Aksel that he'd never seen before. He kept these, and a few other things, too. The rancher who had employed his parents had long ago died, but his son, who now owned the ranch, had always treated them well, and it had been he who employed them long after he might reasonably be expected to, and he who paid for their funerals as well.

In their deaths, Willem was able to remember that he had loved them after all, and that they had taught him things he treasured knowing, and that they had never asked from him anything he wasn't able to do or provide. In less-charitable moments (moments from just a few years prior), he had attributed their lassitude, their unchallenging acceptance of whatever he might or might not do, to a lack of interest: what parent, Malcolm had asked him, half jealously, half pityingly, says nothing when their only child (he had apologized later) tells them he wants to be an actor? But now, older, he was able to appreciate that they
had never even suggested he might owe them a debt—not success, or fealty, or affection, or even loyalty. His father, he knew, had gotten into some sort of trouble in Stockholm—he was never to know what—that had in part encouraged his parents’ move to the States. They would never have demanded he be like them; they hardly wanted to be themselves.

And so he had begun his adulthood, the last three years spent bobbing from bank to bank in a muck-bottomed pond, the trees above and around him blotting out the light, making it too dark for him to see whether the lake he was in opened up into a river or whether it was contained, its own small universe in which he might spend years, decades—his life—searching bumblingly for a way out that didn’t exist, had never existed.

If he had an agent, someone to guide him, she might be able to show him how to escape, how to find his way downstream. But he didn’t, not yet (he had to be optimistic enough to think it was still a matter of “yet”), and so he was left in the company of other seekers, all of them looking for that same elusive tributary, through which few left the lake and by which no one ever wanted to return.

He was willing to wait. He had waited. But recently, he could feel his patience sharpening itself into something splintery and ragged, chipping into dry little bits.

Still—he was not an anxious person, he was not inclined toward self-pity. Indeed, there were moments when, returning from Ortolan or from a rehearsal for a play in which he would be paid almost nothing for a week’s work, so little that he wouldn’t have been able to afford the prix fixe at the restaurant, he would enter the apartment with a feeling of accomplishment. Only to him and Jude would Lispenard Street be considered an achievement—for as much work as he had done to it, and as much as Jude had cleaned it, it was still sad, somehow, and furtive, as if the place was embarrassed to call itself a real apartment—but in those moments he would at times find himself thinking, This is enough. This is more than I hoped. To be in New York, to be an adult, to stand on a raised platform of wood and say other people’s words!—it was an absurd life, a not-life, a life his parents and his brother would never have dreamed for themselves, and yet he got to dream it for himself every day.
But then the feeling would dissipate, and he would be left alone to scan the arts section of the paper, and read about other people who were doing the kinds of things he didn’t even have the expansiveness, the arrogance of imagination to dream of, and in those hours the world would feel very large, and the lake very empty, and the night very black, and he would wish he were back in Wyoming, waiting at the end of the road for Hemming, where the only path he had to navigate was the one back to his parents’ house, where the porch light washed the night with honey.

First there was the life of the office you saw: forty of them in the main room, each with their own desk, Rausch’s glass-walled room at one end, closest to Malcolm’s desk, Thomasson’s glass-walled room at the other. Between them: two walls of windows, one that looked over Fifth Avenue, toward Madison Square Park, the other of which peered over Broadway, at the glum, gray, gum-stamped sidewalk. That life existed officially from ten a.m. until seven p.m., Monday through Friday. In this life, they did what they were told: they tweaked models, they drafted and redrew, they interpreted Rausch’s esoteric scribbles and Thomasson’s explicit, block-printed commands. They did not speak. They did not congregate. When clients came in to meet with Rausch and Thomasson at the long glass table that stood in the center of the main room, they did not look up. When the client was famous, as was more and more the case, they bent so low over their desks and stayed so quiet that even Rausch began whispering, his voice—for once—accommodating itself to the office’s volume.

Then there was the second life of the office, its real life. Thomasson was less and less present anyway, so it was Rausch whose exit they awaited, and sometimes they had to wait for a long time; Rausch, for all his partygoing and press-courting and opining and traveling, was in reality a hard worker, and although he might go out to an event (an opening, a lecture), he might also return, and then things would have to be hastily reassembled, so that the office he walked back into would resemble the office he had left. It was better to wait for the nights he would disappear completely, even if it meant waiting until nine or ten
o’clock. They had cultivated Rausch’s assistant, brought her coffees and
croissants, and knew they could trust her intelligence on Rausch’s arriv-
als and departures.

But once Rausch was definitively gone for the day, the office trans-
formed itself as instantaneously as a pumpkin into a carriage. Music was
turned on (they rotated among the fifteen of them who got to choose),
and takeout menus materialized, and on everyone’s computers, work
for Ratstar Architects was sucked back into digital folders, put to sleep,
unloved and forgotten, for the night. They allowed themselves an
hour of waste, of impersonating Rausch’s weird Teutonic boom (some
of them thought he was secretly from Paramus and had adopted the
name—Joop Rausch, how could it not be fake?—and the extravagant
accent to obscure the fact that he was boring and from Jersey and his
name was probably Jesse Rosenberg), of imitating Thomasson’s scowl
and way of marching up and down the length of the office when he
wanted to perform for company, barking at no one in particular (them,
they supposed), “It’s ze vurk, gentlemen! It’s ze vurk!” They made fun
of the firm’s most senior principal, Dominick Cheung, who was tal-
ented but who was becoming bitter (it was clear to everyone but him
that he would never be made a partner, no matter how often Rausch
and Thomasson promised him), and even of the projects they worked
on: the unrealized neo-Coptic church wrought from travertine in Cappadocia;
the house with no visible framework in Karuizawa that now
wept rust down its faceless glass surfaces; the museum of food in Seville
that was meant to win an award but didn’t; the museum of dolls in
Santa Catarina that never should’ve won an award but did. They made
fun of the schools they’d gone to—MIT, Yale, Rhode Island School
of Design, Columbia, Harvard—and how although they’d of course
been warned that their lives would be misery for years, how they had
all of them, to a one, assumed they’d be the exception (and now all,
to a one, secretly thought they still would be). They made fun of how
little money they made, how they were twenty-seven, thirty, thirty-two,
and still lived with their parents, a roommate, a girlfriend in bank-
ing, a boyfriend in publishing (a sad thing, when you had to sponge
off of your boyfriend in publishing because he made more than you).
They bragged of what they would be doing if they hadn’t gone into this
wretched industry: they’d be a curator (possibly the one job where you’d
make even less than you did now), a sommelier (well, make that two
jobs), a gallery owner (make it three), a writer (all right, four—clearly, none of them were equipped to make money, ever, in any imagining). They fought about buildings they loved and buildings they hated. They debated a photography show at this gallery, a video art show at another. They shouted back and forth at one another about critics, and restaurants, and philosophies, and materials. They commiserated with one another about peers who had become successes, and gloated over peers who had quit the business entirely, who had become llama farmers in Mendoza, social workers in Ann Arbor, math teachers in Chengdu.

During the day, they played at being architects. Every now and then a client, his gaze helicoptering slowly around the room, would stop on one of them, usually either Margaret or Eduard, who were the best-looking among them, and Rausch, who was unusually attuned to shifts in attention away from himself, would call the singled-out over, as if beckoning a child to the adults’ dinner party. “Ah, yes, this is Margaret,” he’d say, as the client looked at her appraisingly, much as he had minutes before been looking at Rausch’s blueprints (blueprints finished in fact by Margaret). “She’ll be running me out of town someday soon, I’m sure.” And then he’d laugh his sad, contrived, walrus-bark laugh: “Ah! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

Margaret would smile and say hello, and roll her eyes at them the moment she turned around. But they knew she was thinking what they were all thinking: Fuck you, Rausch. And: When? When will I replace you? When will it be my turn?

In the meantime, all they had was play: after the debating and the shouting and the eating, there was silence, and the office filled with the hollow tappings of mice being clicked and personal work being dragged from folders and opened, and the grainy sound of pencils being dragged across paper. Although they all worked at the same time, using the same company resources, no one ever asked to see anyone else’s work; it was as if they had collectively decided to pretend it didn’t exist. So you worked, drawing dream structures and bending parabolas into dream shapes, until midnight, and then you left, always with the same stupid joke: “See you in ten hours.” Or nine, or eight, if you were really lucky, if you were really getting a lot done that night.

Tonight was one of the nights Malcolm left alone, and early. Even if he walked out with someone else, he was never able to take the train with them; they all lived downtown or in Brooklyn, and he lived
a little life

uptown. The benefit to walking out alone was that no one would witness him catching a cab. He wasn’t the only person in the office with rich parents—Katharine’s parents were rich as well, as, he was pretty sure, were Margaret’s and Frederick’s—but he lived with his rich parents, and the others didn’t.

He hailed a taxi. “Seventy-first and Lex,” he instructed the driver. When the driver was black, he always said Lexington. When the driver wasn’t, he was more honest: “Between Lex and Park, closer to Park.” JB thought this was ridiculous at best, offensive at worst. “You think they’re gonna think you’re any more gangster because they think you live at Lex and not Park?” he’d ask. “Malcolm, you’re a dumbass.”

This fight about taxis was one of many he’d had with JB over the years about blackness, and more specifically, his insufficient blackness. A different fight about taxis had begun when Malcolm (stupidly; he’d recognized his mistake even as he heard himself saying the words) had observed that he’d never had trouble getting a cab in New York and maybe people who complained about it were exaggerating. This was his junior year, during his and JB’s first and last visit to the weekly Black Students’ Union meeting. JB’s eyes had practically engorged, so appalled and gleeful was he, but when it was another guy, a self-righteous prick from Atlanta, who informed Malcolm that he was, number one, barely black, number two, an oreo, and number three, because of his white mother, unable to wholly understand the challenges of being truly black, it had been JB who had defended him—JB was always harassing him about his relative blackness, but he didn’t like it when other people did it, and he certainly didn’t like it when it was done in mixed company, which JB considered everyone except Jude and Willem, or, more specifically, other black people.

Back in his parents’ house on Seventy-first Street (closer to Park), he endured the nightly parental interrogation, shouted down from the second floor (“Malcolm, is that you?” “Yes!” “Did you eat?” “Yes!” “Are you still hungry?” “No!”), and trudged upstairs to his lair to review once again the central quandaries of his life.

Although JB hadn’t been around to overhear that night’s exchange with the taxicab driver, Malcolm’s guilt and self-hatred over it moved race to the top of tonight’s list. Race had always been a challenge for Malcolm, but their sophomore year, he had hit upon what he considered a brilliant cop-out: he wasn’t black; he was post-black. (Postmod-
ernism had entered Malcolm’s frame of consciousness much later than everyone else’s, as he tried to avoid taking literature classes in a sort of passive rebellion against his mother.) Unfortunately, no one was convinced by this explanation, least of all JB, whom Malcolm had begun to think of as not so much black but pre-black, as if blackness, like nirvana, was an idealized state that he was constantly striving to erupt into.

And anyway, JB had found yet another way to trump Malcolm, for just as Malcolm was discovering postmodern identity, JB was discovering performance art (the class he was in, Identity as Art: Performative Transformations and the Contemporary Body, was favored by a certain kind of mustachioed lesbian who terrified Malcolm but for some reason flocked to JB). So moved was he by the work of Lee Lozano that for his midterm project, he decided to perform an homage to her entitled Decide to Boycott White People (After Lee Lozano), in which he stopped talking to all white people. He semi-apologetically, but mostly proudly, explained his plan to them one Saturday—as of midnight that night, he would stop talking to Willem altogether, and would reduce his conversational output with Malcolm by a half. Because Jude’s race was undetermined, he would continue speaking to him, but would only do so in riddles or Zen koans, in recognition of the unknowability of his ethnic origins.

Malcolm could see by the look that Jude and Willem exchanged with each other, brief and unsmiling though, he observed irritably, full of meaning (he always suspected the two of them of conducting an extracurricular friendship from which he was excluded), that they were amused by this and were prepared to humor JB. For his part, he supposed he should be grateful for what might amount to a period of respite from JB, but he wasn’t grateful and he wasn’t amused: he was annoyed, both by JB’s easy playfulness with race and by his using this stupid, gimmicky project (for which he would probably get an A) to make a commentary on Malcolm’s identity, which was really none of JB’s business.

Living with JB under the terms of his project (and really, when were they not negotiating their lives around JB’s whims and whimsies?) was actually very much like living with JB under normal circumstances. Minimizing his conversations with Malcolm did not reduce the number of times JB asked Malcolm if he could pick up something for him at the store, or refill his laundry card since Malcolm was going anyway,
or if he could borrow Malcolm’s copy of Don Quixote for Spanish class because he’d left his in the basement men’s room in the library. His not speaking to Willem didn’t also mean that there wasn’t plenty of non-verbal communication, including lots of texts and notes that he’d scribble down (“Screening of Godfather at Rex’s—coming?”) and hand him, which Malcolm was positive was not what Lozano had intended. And his poor-man’s Ionesconian exchanges with Jude suddenly dissolved when he needed Jude to do his calculus homework, at which point Ionesco abruptly transformed into Mussolini, especially after Ionesco realized that there was a whole other problem set he hadn’t even begun because he had been busy in the men’s room in the library, and class began in forty-three minutes (“But that’s enough time for you, right, Judy?”).

Naturally, JB being JB and their peers easy prey for anything that was glib and glittery, JB’s little experiment was written up in the school paper, and then in a new black literary magazine, There Is Contrition, and became, for a short tedious period, the talk of the campus. The attention had revived JB’s already flagging enthusiasm for the project—he was only eight days into it, and Malcolm could see him at times almost wanting to explode into talk with Willem—and he was able to last another two days before grandly concluding the experiment a success and announcing that his point had been made.

“What point?” Malcolm had asked. “That you can be as annoying to white people without talking to them as when you are talking to them?”

“Oh, fuck you, Mal,” said JB, but lazily, too triumphant to even engage with him. “You wouldn’t understand.” And then he headed off to see his boyfriend, a white guy with a face like a praying mantis’s who was always regarding JB with a fervent and worshipful expression that made Malcolm feel slightly sick.

At the time, Malcolm had been convinced that this racial discomfort he felt was a temporary thing, a purely contextual sensation that was awakened in everyone in college but then evaporated the further from it you moved. He had never felt any particular agita about or pride in being black, except in the most remote ways: he knew he was supposed to have certain feelings about certain things in life (taxicab drivers, for one), but somehow that knowledge was only theoretical, not anything he had experienced himself. And yet blackness was an essential part of
his family’s narrative, which had been told and retold until it was worn
to a shine: how his father had been the third black managing director at
his investment firm, the third black trustee at the very white boys’ pre-
paratory school that Malcolm had attended, the second black CFO of a
major commercial bank. (Malcolm’s father had been born too late to be
the first black anything, but in the corridor in which he moved—south
of Ninety-sixth Street and north of Fifty-seventh; east of Fifth and west
of Lexington—he was still as rare as the red-tailed hawk that sometimes
nested in the crenellations of one of the buildings opposite theirs on
Park Avenue.) Growing up, the fact of his father’s blackness (and, he
supposed, his own), had been trumped by other, more significant mat-
ters, factors that counted for more in their slice of New York City than
his father’s race: his wife’s prominence in the Manhattan literary scene,
for example, and, most important, his wealth. The New York that Mal-
colm and his family occupied was one divided not along racial lines but
rather tax brackets, and Malcolm had grown up insulated from every-
thing that money could protect him from, including bigotry itself—or
so it in retrospect seemed. In fact, it wasn’t until college that he was
made to truly confront the different ways in which blackness had been
experienced by other people, and, perhaps more stunningly, how apart
his family’s money had set him from the rest of the country (although
this assumed you could consider his classmates representative of the
rest of the country, which you of course couldn’t). Even today, almost
a decade after meeting him, he still had trouble comprehending the
sort of poverty that Jude had been raised in—his disbelief when he
finally realized that the backpack Jude had arrived to college with had
contained, literally, everything on earth in his possession had been so
intense that it had been almost physical, so profound that he had men-
tioned it to his father, and he was not in the habit of revealing to his
father evidence of his naïveté, for fear of provoking a lecture about his
naïveté. But even his father, who had grown up poor in Queens—albeit
with two working parents and a new set of clothes every year—had been
shocked, Malcolm sensed, although he had endeavored to conceal it
by sharing a story of his own childhood deprivation (something about
a Christmas tree that had to be bought the day after Christmas), as if
lack of privilege were a competition that he was still determined to win,
even in the face of another’s clear and inarguable triumph.

However, race seemed less and less a defining characteristic when
one was six years out of college, and those people who still nursed it as the core of their identity came across as somehow childish and faintly pathetic, as if clinging to a youthful fascination with Amnesty International or the tuba: an outdated and embarrassing preoccupation with something that reached its potent apotheosis in college applications. At his age, the only truly important aspects of one’s identity were sexual prowess; professional accomplishments; and money. And in all three of these aspects, Malcolm was also failing.

Money he set aside. He would someday inherit a huge amount. He didn’t know how huge, and he had never felt the need to ask, and no one had ever felt the need to tell him, which is how he knew it was huge indeed. Not Ezra huge, of course, but—well, maybe it was Ezra huge. Malcolm’s parents lived much more modestly than they might, thanks to his mother’s aversions to garish displays of wealth, so he never knew if they lived between Lexington and Park because they couldn’t afford to live between Madison and Fifth, or whether they lived between Lexington and Park because his mother would find it too ostentatious to live between Madison and Fifth. He would like to make his own money, he would. But he wasn’t one of those rich kids who tortured himself about it. He would try to earn his way, but it wasn’t wholly up to him.

Sex, and sexual fulfillment, however, was something he did have to take responsibility for. He couldn’t blame his lack of a sex life on the fact that he’d chosen a low-paying field, or on his parents for not properly motivating him. (Or could he? As a child, Malcolm had had to endure his parents’ long groping sessions—often conducted in front of him and Flora—and he now wondered whether their show-offy competence had dulled some competitive spirit within him.) His last real relationship had been more than three years ago, with a woman named Imogene who dumped him to become a lesbian. It was unclear to him, even now, whether he had actually been physically attracted to Imogene or had simply been relieved to have someone else make decisions that he had been happy to follow. Recently, he had seen Imogene (also an architect, although at a public interest group that built experimental low-income housing—exactly the sort of job Malcolm felt he should want to have, even if he secretly didn’t) and had teasingly told her—he had been joking!—that he couldn’t help but feel that he had driven her to lesbianism. But Imogene had bristled and told him that she had
always been a lesbian and had stayed with him because he had seemed so sexually confused that she thought she might be able to help educate him.

But since Imogene, there had been no one. Oh, what was wrong with him? Sex; sexuality: these too were things he should have sorted out in college, the last place where such insecurity was not just tolerated but encouraged. In his early twenties, he had tried falling in and out of love with various people—friends of Flora’s, classmates, one of his mother’s clients, a debut novelist who had written a literary roman à clef about being a sexually confused firefighter—and yet still didn’t know to whom he might be attracted. He often thought that being gay (as much as he also couldn’t stand the thought of it; somehow it, like race, seemed the province of college, an identity to inhabit for a period before maturing to more proper and practical realms) was attractive mostly for its accompanying accessories, its collection of political opinions and causes and its embrace of aesthetics. He was missing, it seemed, the sense of victimization and woundedness and perpetual anger it took to be black, but he was certain he possessed the interests that would be required if he were gay.

He fancied himself already half in love with Willem, and at various points in love with Jude too, and at work he would sometimes find himself staring at Eduard. Sometimes he noticed Dominick Cheung staring at Eduard as well, and then he would stop himself, because the last person he wanted to be was sad, forty-five-year-old Dominick, leering at an associate in a firm that he would never inherit. A few weekends ago, he had been at Willem and Jude’s, ostensibly to take some measurements so he could design them a bookcase, and Willem had leaned in front of him to grab the measuring tape from the sofa, and the very nearness of him had been suddenly unbearable, and he had made an excuse about needing to get into the office and had abruptly left, Willem calling after him.

He had in fact gone to the office, ignoring Willem’s texts, and had sat there at his computer, staring without seeing the file before him and wondering yet again why he had joined Ratstar. The worst thing was that the answer was so obvious that he didn’t even need to ask it: he had joined Ratstar to impress his parents. His last year of architecture school, Malcolm had had a choice—he could have chosen to work...
with two classmates, Jason Kim and Sonal Mars, who were starting their own firm with money from Sonal’s grandparents, or he could have joined Ratstar.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason had said when Malcolm had told him of his decision. “You realize what your life is going to be like as an associate at a place like that, don’t you?”

“It’s a great firm,” he’d said, staunchly, sounding like his mother, and Jason had rolled his eyes. “I mean, it’s a great name to have on my résumé.” But even as he said it, he knew (and, worse, feared Jason knew as well) what he really meant: it was a great name for his parents to say at cocktail parties. And, indeed, his parents liked to say it. “Two kids,” Malcolm had overheard his father say to someone at a dinner party celebrating one of Malcolm’s mother’s clients. “My daughter’s an editor at FSG, and my son works for Ratstar Architects.” The woman had made an approving sound, and Malcolm, who had actually been trying to find a way to tell his father he wanted to quit, had felt something in him wilt. At such times, he envied his friends for the exact things he had once pitied them for: the fact that no one had any expectations for them, the ordinariness of their families (or their very lack of them), the way they navigated their lives by only their own ambitions.

And now? Now Jason and Sonal had had two projects appear in New York and one in The New York Times, while he was still doing the sort of work he had done in his first year of architecture school, working for two pretentious men at a firm they had pretentiously named after a pretentious Anne Sexton poem, and getting paid almost nothing to do it.

He had gone to architecture school for the worst reason of all, it seemed: because he loved buildings. It had been a respectable passion, and when he was a child, his parents had indulged him with tours of houses, of monuments wherever they had traveled. Even as a very young boy, he had always drawn imaginary buildings, built imaginary structures: they were a comfort and they were a repository—everything he was unable to articulate, everything he was unable to decide, he could, it seemed, resolve in a building.

And in an essential way, this was what he was most ashamed of: not his poor understanding of sex, not his traitorous racial tendencies, not his inability to separate himself from his parents or make his own money or behave like an autonomous creature. It was that, when he and
his colleagues sat there at night, the group of them burrowed deep into their own ambitious dream-structures, all of them drawing and planning their improbable buildings, he was doing nothing. He had lost the ability to imagine anything. And so every evening, while the others created, he copied: he drew buildings he had seen on his travels, buildings other people had dreamed and constructed, buildings he had lived in or passed through. Again and again, he made what had already been made, not even bothering to improve them, just mimicking them. He was twenty-eight; his imagination had deserted him; he was a copyist.

It frightened him. JB had his series. Jude had his work, Willem had his. But what if Malcolm never again created anything? He longed for the years when it was enough to simply be in his room with his hand moving over a piece of graph paper, before the years of decisions and identities, when his parents made his choices for him, and the only thing he had to concentrate on was the clean blade stroke of a line, the ruler’s perfect knife edge.
It was JB who decided that Willem and Jude should host a New Year's Eve party at their apartment. This was resolved at Christmas, which was a three-part affair: Christmas Eve was held at JB's mother's place in Fort Greene, and Christmas dinner itself (a formal, organized event, at which suits and ties were required) was at Malcolm's house, and succeeded a casual lunch at JB's aunts' house. They had always followed this ritual—four years ago, they had added Thanksgiving at Jude's friends Harold and Julia's house in Cambridge to the lineup—but New Year's Eve had never been assigned. The previous year, the first post-school-life New Year's that they had all been in the same city at the same time, they had all ended up separate and miserable—JB lodged at some lame party at Ezra's, Malcolm stuck at his parents' friends' dinner uptown, Willem trapped by Findlay into a holiday shift at Ortolan, Jude mired in bed with the flu at Lispenard Street—and had resolved to actually make plans for the next year. But they hadn't, and hadn't, and then it was December and they still hadn't done anything.

So they didn't mind JB deciding for them, not in this case. They figured they could accommodate twenty-five people comfortably, or forty uncomfortably. “So make it forty,” said JB, promptly, as they'd known he would, but later, back at their apartment, they wrote up a list of just twenty, and only their and Malcolm's friends, knowing that JB would invite more people than were allotted him, extending invitations to friends and friends of friends and not-even friends and colleagues and bartenders and shop clerks, until the place grew so dense with bod-
ies that they could open all the windows to the night air and still not dispel the fog of heat and smoke that would inevitably accumulate.

“Don’t make this complicated,” was the other thing JB had said, but Willem and Malcolm knew that was a caution meant solely for Jude, who had a tendency to make things more elaborate than was necessary, to spend nights making batches of gougeres when everyone would have been content with pizza, to actually clean the place beforehand, as if anyone would care if the floors were crunchy with grit and the sink was scummed with dried soap stains and flecks of previous days’ breakfasts.

The night before the party was unseasonably warm, warm enough that Willem walked the two miles from Ortolan to the apartment, which was so thick with its rich butter scents of cheese and dough and fennel that it made him feel he had never left work at all. He stood in the kitchen for a while, pinching the little tumoric blobs of pastry off their cooling racks to keep them from sticking, looking at the stack of plastic containers with their herbed shortbreads and cornmeal gingersnaps and feeling slightly sad—the same sadness he felt when he noticed that Jude had cleaned after all—because he knew they would be devoured mindlessly, swallowed whole with beer, and that they would begin the New Year finding crumbs of those beautiful cookies everywhere, trampled and stamped into the tiles. In the bedroom, Jude was already asleep, and the window was cracked open, and the heavy air made Willem dream of spring, and trees afuzz with yellow flowers, and a flock of blackbirds, their wings lacquered as if with oil, gliding soundlessly across a sea-colored sky.

When he woke, though, the weather had turned again, and it took him a moment to realize that he had been shivering, and that the sounds in his dream had been of wind, and that he was being shaken awake, and that his name was being repeated, not by birds but by a human voice: “Willem, Willem.”

He turned over and propped himself up on his elbows, but was able to register Jude only in segments: his face first, and then the fact that he was holding his left arm before him with his right hand, and that he had cocooned it with something—his towel, he realized—which was so white in the gloom that it seemed a source of light itself, and he stared at it, transfixed.

“Willem, I’m sorry,” said Jude, and his voice was so calm that for a few seconds, he thought it was a dream, and stopped listening, and Jude
had to repeat himself. “There’s been an accident, Willem; I’m sorry. I need you to take me to Andy’s.”

Finally he woke. “What kind of accident?”

“I cut myself. It was an accident.” He paused. “Will you take me?”

“Yeah, of course,” he said, but he was still confused, still asleep, and it was without understanding that he fumblingly dressed, and joined Jude in the hallway, where he was waiting, and then walked with him up to Canal, where he turned for the subway before Jude pulled him back: “I think we need a cab.”

In the taxi—Jude giving the driver the address in that same crushed, muted voice—he at last gave in to consciousness, and saw that Jude was still holding the towel. “Why did you bring your towel?” he asked.

“I told you—I cut myself.”

“But—is it bad?”

Jude shrugged, and Willem noticed for the first time that his lips had gone a strange color, a not-color, although maybe that was the streetlights, which slapped and slid across his face, bruising it yellow and ocher and a sickly larval white as the cab pushed north. Jude leaned his head against the window and closed his eyes, and it was then that Willem felt the beginnings of nausea, of fear, although he was unable to articulate why, only that he was in a cab heading uptown and something had happened, and he didn’t know what but that it was something bad, that he wasn’t comprehending something important and vital, and that the damp warmth of a few hours ago had vanished and the world had reverted to its icy harshness, its raw end-of-year cruelty.

Andy’s office was on Seventy-eighth and Park, near Malcolm’s parents’ house, and it was only once they were inside, in the true light, that Willem saw that the dark pattern on Jude’s shirt was blood, and that the towel had become sticky with it, almost varnished, its tiny loops of cotton matted down like wet fur. “I’m sorry,” Jude said to Andy, who had opened the door to let them in, and when Andy unwrapped the towel, all Willem saw was what looked like a choking of blood, as if Jude’s arm had grown a mouth and was vomiting blood from it, and with such avidity that it was forming little frothy bubbles that popped and spat as if in excitement.

“Jesus fucking Christ, Jude,” said Andy, and steered him back to the examining room, and Willem sat down to wait. Oh god, he thought, oh god. But it was as if his mind was a bit of machinery caught uselessly
in a groove, and he couldn’t think beyond those two words. It was too bright in the waiting room, and he tried to relax, but he couldn’t for the phrase beating its rhythm like a heartbeat, thudding through his body like a second pulse: Oh god. Oh god. Oh god.

He waited a long hour before Andy called his name. Andy was eight years older than he, and they had known him since their sophomore year, when Jude had had an episode so sustained that the three of them had finally decided to take him to the hospital connected with the university, where Andy had been the resident on call. He had been the only doctor Jude agreed to see again, and now, even though Andy was an orthopedic surgeon, he still treated Jude for anything that went wrong, from his back to his legs to flu and colds. They all liked Andy, and trusted him, too.

“You can take him home,” Andy said. He was angry. With a snap, he peeled off his gloves, which were crusty with blood, and pushed back his stool. On the floor was a long, messy paint-sweep streak of red, as if someone had tried to clean up something sloshed and had given up in exasperation. The walls had red on them as well, and Andy’s sweater was stiff with it. Jude sat on the table, looking slumped and miserable and holding a glass bottle of orange juice. His hair was glued together in clumps, and his shirt appeared hard and shellacked, as if it was made not from cloth but from metal. “Jude, go to the waiting room,” Andy instructed, and Jude did, meekly.

Once he was gone, Andy shut the door and looked at Willem. “Has he seemed suicidal to you?”

“What? No.” He felt himself grow very still. “Is that what he was trying to do?”

Andy sighed. “He says he wasn’t. But—I don’t know. No. I don’t know; I can’t tell.” He went over to the sink and began to scrub violently at his hands. “On the other hand, if he had gone to the ER—which you guys really should’ve fucking done, you know—they most likely would’ve hospitalized him. Which is why he probably didn’t.” Now he was speaking aloud to himself. He pumped a small lake of soap onto his hands and washed them again. “You know he cuts himself, don’t you?”

For a while, he couldn’t answer. “No,” he said.

Andy turned back around and stared at Willem, wiping each finger dry slowly. “He hasn’t seemed depressed?” he asked. “Is he eating regularly, sleeping? Does he seem listless, out of sorts?”
“He’s seemed fine,” Willem said, although the truth was that he didn’t know. Had Jude been eating? Had he been sleeping? Should he have noticed? Should he have been paying more attention? “I mean, he’s seemed the same as he always is.”

“Well,” said Andy. He looked deflated for a moment, and the two of them stood quietly, facing but not looking at each other. “I’m going to take his word for it this time,” he said. “I just saw him a week ago, and I agree, nothing seemed unusual. But if he starts behaving strangely at all—I mean it, Willem—you call me right away.”

“I promise,” he said. He had seen Andy a few times over the years, and had always sensed his frustration, which often seemed directed toward many people at once: at himself, at Jude, and especially at Jude’s friends, none of whom, Andy always managed to suggest (without ever saying it aloud), were doing a good enough job taking care of him. He liked this about Andy, his sense of outrage over Jude, even as he feared his disapproval and also thought it somewhat unfair.

And then, as it often did once he had finished rebuking them, Andy’s voice changed and became almost tender. “I know you will,” he said. “It’s late. Go home. Make sure you give him something to eat when he wakes up. Happy New Year.”

They rode home in silence. The driver had taken a single, long look at Jude and said, “I need an extra twenty dollars on the fare.”

“Fine,” Willem had said.

The sky was almost light, but he knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep. In the taxi, Jude had turned away from Willem and looked out of the window, and back at the apartment, he stumbled at the doorway and walked slowly toward the bathroom, where Willem knew he would start trying to clean up.

“Don’t,” he told him. “Go to bed,” and Jude, obedient for once, changed direction and shuffled into the bedroom, where he fell asleep almost immediately.

Willem sat on his own bed and watched him. He was aware, suddenly, of his every joint and muscle and bone, and this made him feel very, very old, and for several minutes he simply sat staring.
“Jude,” he called, and then again more insistently, and when Jude didn’t answer, he went over to his bed and nudged him onto his back and, after a moment’s hesitation, pushed up the right sleeve of his shirt. Under his hands, the fabric didn’t so much yield as it did bend and crease, like cardboard, and although he was only able to fold it to the inside of Jude’s elbow, it was enough to see the three columns of neat white scars, each about an inch wide and slightly raised, laddering up his arm. He tucked his finger under the sleeve, and felt the tracks continuing onto the upper arm, but stopped when he reached the bicep, unwilling to explore more, and withdrew his hand. He wasn’t able to examine the left arm—Andy had cut back the sleeve on that one, and Jude’s entire forearm and hand were wrapped with white gauze—but he knew he would find the same thing there.

He had been lying when he told Andy he hadn’t known Jude cut himself. Or rather, he hadn’t known for certain, but that was only a technicality: he knew, and he had known for a long time. When they were at Malcolm’s house the summer after Hemming died, he and Malcolm had gotten drunk one afternoon, and as they sat and watched JB and Jude, back from their walk to the dunes, fling sand at each other, Malcolm had asked, “Have you ever noticed how Jude always wears long sleeves?”

He’d grunted in response. He had, of course—it was difficult not to, especially on hot days—but he had never let himself wonder why. Much of his friendship with Jude, it often seemed, was not letting himself ask the questions he knew he ought to, because he was afraid of the answers.

There had been a silence then, and the two of them had watched as JB, drunk himself, fell backward into the sand and Jude limped over and begun burying him.

“Flora had a friend who always wore long sleeves,” Malcolm continued. “Her name was Maryam. She used to cut herself.”

He let the silence pull between them until he imagined he could hear it come alive. There had been a girl in their dorm who had cut herself as well. She had been with them freshman year, but, he realized, he hadn’t seen her at all this past year.

“Why?” he asked Malcolm. On the sand, Jude had worked up to JB’s waist. JB was singing something meandering and tuneless.
“I don’t know,” Malcolm said. “She had a lot of problems.”
He waited, but it seemed Malcolm had nothing more to say. “What happened to her?”
“I don’t know. They lost touch when Flora went to college; she never spoke about her again.”
They were quiet again. Somewhere along the way, he knew, it had been silently decided among the three of them that he would be primarily responsible for Jude, and this, he recognized, was Malcolm’s way of presenting him with a difficulty that needed a solution, although what, exactly, the problem was—or what the answer might be—he wasn’t certain, and he was willing to bet that Malcolm didn’t know, either.

For the next few days he avoided Jude, because he knew if he were alone with him, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from having a conversation with him, and he wasn’t sure that he wanted to, or what that conversation would be. It wasn’t hard to do: in the daytime, they were together as a group, and at night, they were each in their own rooms. But one evening, Malcolm and JB left together to pick up the lobsters, and he and Jude were left on their own in the kitchen, slicing tomatoes and washing lettuce. It had been a long, sunny, sleepy day, and Jude was in one of his light moods, when he was almost carefree, and even as he asked, Willem experienced a predictive melancholy at ruining such a perfect moment, one in which everything—the pinkbled sky above them and the way the knife sliced so cleanly through the vegetables beneath them—had conspired to work so well, only to have him upset it.

“Don’t you want to borrow one of my T-shirts?” he asked Jude.
He didn’t answer until he had finished coring the tomato before him, and then gave Willem a steady, blank gaze. “No.”
“Aren’t you hot?”
Jude smiled at him, faintly, warningly. “It’s going to be cold any minute now.” And it was true. When the last daub of sun vanished, it would be chilly, and Willem himself would have to go back to his room for a sweater.

“But”—and he heard in advance how absurd he would sound, how the confrontation had wriggled out of his control, catlike, as soon as he had initiated it—“you’re going to get lobster all over your sleeves.”
At this, Jude made a noise, a funny kind of squawk, too loud and too barky to be a real laugh, and turned back to the cutting board. “I
think I can handle it, Willem,” he said, and although his voice was mild, Willem saw how tightly he was holding the knife’s handle, almost squeezing it, so that the bunch of his knuckles tinged a suety yellow.

They were lucky then, both of them, that Malcolm and JB returned before they had to continue talking, but not before Willem heard Jude begin to ask “Why are—” And although he never finished his sentence (and indeed, didn’t speak to Willem once throughout dinner, through which he kept his sleeves perfectly neat), Willem knew that his question would not have been “Why are you asking me this?” but “Why are you asking me this?” because Willem had always been careful not to express too much interest in exploring the many cupboarded cabinet in which Jude had secreted himself.

If it had been anyone else, he told himself, he wouldn’t have hesitated. He would have demanded answers, he would have called mutual friends, he would have sat him down and yelled and pleaded and threatened until a confession was extracted. But this was part of the deal when you were friends with Jude: he knew it, Andy knew it, they all knew it. You let things slide that your instincts told you not to, you scooted around the edges of your suspicions. You understood that proof of your friendship lay in keeping your distance, in accepting what was told you, in turning and walking away when the door was shut in your face instead of trying to force it open again. The war-room discussions the four of them had had about other people—about Black Henry Young, when they thought the girl he was dating was cheating on him and were trying to decide how to tell him; about Ezra, when they knew the girl he was dating was cheating on him and were trying to decide how to tell him—they would never have about Jude. He would consider it a betrayal, and it wouldn’t help, anyway.

For the rest of the night, they avoided each other, but on his way to bed, he found himself standing outside Jude’s room, his hand hovering above the door, ready to knock, before he returned to himself: What would he say? What did he want to hear? And so he left, continued on, and the next day, when Jude made no mention of the previous evening’s almost-conversation, he didn’t either, and soon that day turned to night, and then another, and another, and they moved further and further from his ever trying, however ineffectively, to make Jude answer a question he couldn’t bring himself to ask.

But it was always there, that question, and in unexpected moments
it would muscle its way into his consciousness, positioning itself stubbornly at the forefront of his mind, as immovable as a troll. Four years ago, he and JB were sharing an apartment and attending graduate school, and Jude, who had remained in Boston for law school, had come down to visit them. It had been night then, too, and there had been a locked bathroom door, and him banging on it, abruptly, inexplicably terrified, and Jude answering it, looking irritated but also (or was he imagining this?) strangely guilty, and asking him “What, Willem?” and he once again being unable to answer, but knowing that something was amiss. Inside the room had smelled sharply tannic, the rusted-metal scent of blood, and he had even picked through the trash can and found a curl of a bandage wrapper, but was that from dinner, when JB had cut himself with a knife while trying to chop a carrot in his hand (Willem suspected he exaggerated his incompetency in the kitchen in order to avoid having to do any prep work), or was it from Jude’s nighttime punishments? But again (again!), he did nothing, and when he passed Jude (feigning sleep or actually asleep?) on the sofa in the living room, he said nothing, and the next day, he again said nothing, and the days unfurled before him as clean as paper, and with each day he said nothing, and nothing, and nothing.

And now there was this. If he had done something (what?) three years ago, eight years ago, would this have happened? And what exactly was this?

But this time he would say something, because this time he had proof. This time, to let Jude slip away and evade him would mean that he himself would be culpable if anything happened.

After he had resolved this, he felt the fatigue overwhelm him, felt it erase the worry and anxiety and frustration of the night. It was the last day of the year, and as he lay down on his bed and closed his eyes, the last thing he remembered feeling was surprise that he should be falling asleep so fast.

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It was almost two in the afternoon when Willem finally woke, and the first thing he remembered was his resolve from earlier that morning. Certainly things had been realigned to discourage his sense of initiative: Jude’s bed was clean. Jude was not in it. The bathroom, when he
visited it, smelled eggily of bleach. And at the card table, there was Jude himself, stamping circles into dough with a stoicism that made Willem both annoyed and relieved. If he was to confront Jude, it seemed, it would be without the benefit of disarray, of evidence of disaster.

He slouched into the chair across from him. “What’re you doing?”

Jude didn’t look up. “Making more gougères,” he said, calmly. “One of the batches I made yesterday isn’t quite right.”

“No one’s going to fucking care, Jude,” he said meanly, and then, barreling helplessly forward, “We could just give them cheese sticks and it’d be the same thing.”

Jude shrugged, and Willem felt his annoyance quicken into anger. Here Jude sat after what was, he could now admit, a terrifying night, acting as if nothing had happened, even as his bandage-wrapped hand lay uselessly on the table. He was about to speak when Jude put down the water glass he’d been using as a pastry cutter and looked at him. “I’m really sorry, Willem,” he said, so softly that Willem almost couldn’t hear him. He saw Willem looking at his hand and pulled it into his lap. “I should never—” He paused. “I’m sorry. Don’t be mad at me.”

His anger dissolved. “Jude,” he asked, “what were you doing?”

“Not what you think. I promise you, Willem.”

Years later, Willem would recount this conversation—its contours, if not its actual, literal content—for Malcolm as proof of his own incompetence, his own failure. How might things have been different if he spoke only one sentence? And that sentence could have been “Jude, are you trying to kill yourself?” or “Jude, you need to tell me what’s going on,” or “Jude, why do you do this to yourself?” Any of those would have been acceptable; any of those would have led to a larger conversation that would have been reparative, or at the very least preventative.

Wouldn’t it?

But there, in the moment, he instead only mumbled, “Okay.”

They sat in silence for what felt like a long time, listening to the murmur of one of their neighbors’ televisions, and it was only much later that Willem would wonder whether Jude had been saddened or relieved that he had been so readily believed.

“Aren’t you mad at me?”

“No.” He cleared his throat. And he wasn’t. Or, at least, mad was not the word he would have chosen, but he couldn’t then articulate what word would be correct. “But we obviously have to cancel the party.”
At this, Jude looked alarmed. “Why?”

“Why? Are you kidding me?”

“Willem,” Jude said, adopting what Willem thought of as his litigatory tone, “we can’t cancel. People are going to be showing up in seven hours—less. And we really have no clue who JB’s invited. They’re going to show up anyway, even if we let everyone else know. And besides”—he inhaled sharply, as if he’d had a lung infection and was trying to prove it had resolved itself—“I’m perfectly fine. It’ll be more difficult if we cancel than if we just go forward.”

Oh, how and why did he always listen to Jude? But he did, once again, and soon it was eight, and the windows were once again open, and the kitchen was once again hot with pastry—as if the previous night had never happened, as if those hours had been an illusion—and Malcolm and JB were arriving. Willem stood in the door of their bedroom, buttoning up his shirt and listening to Jude tell them that he had burned his arm baking the gougères, and that Andy had had to apply a salve.

“I told you not to make those fucking gougères,” he could hear JB say, happily. He loved Jude’s baking.

He was overcome, then, with a powerful sensation: he could close the door, and go to sleep, and when he woke, it would be a new year, and everything would be wiped fresh, and he wouldn’t feel that deep, writhing discomfort inside of him. The thought of seeing Malcolm and JB, of interacting with them and smiling and joking, seemed suddenly excruciating.

But, of course, see them he did, and when JB demanded they all go up to the roof so he could get some fresh air and have a smoke, he let Malcolm complain uselessly and halfheartedly about how cold it was without joining in, before resignedly following the three of them up the narrow staircase that led to the tar-papered roof.

He knew that he was sulking, and he removed himself to the back of the building, letting the others talk without him. Above him, the sky was already completely dark, midnight dark. If he faced north, he could see directly beneath him the art-supply store where JB had been working part-time since quitting the magazine a month ago, and in the distance, the Empire State Building’s gaudy, graceless bulk, its tower aglow with a garish blue light that made him think of gas stations, and the long drive back to his parents’ house from Hemming’s hospital bed so many years ago.
“Guys,” he called over to the others, “it’s cold.” He wasn’t wearing his coat; none of them were. “Let’s go.” But when he went to the door that opened into the building’s stairwell, the handle wouldn’t turn. He tried it again—it wouldn’t budge. They were locked out. “Fuck!” he shouted. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Jesus, Willem,” said Malcolm, startled, because Willem rarely got angry. “Jude? Do you have the key?”

But Jude didn’t. “Fuck!” He couldn’t help himself. Everything felt so wrong. He couldn’t look at Jude. He blamed him, which was unfair. He blamed himself, which was more fair but which made him feel worse. “Who’s got their phone?” But idiotically, no one had his phone: they were down in the apartment, where they themselves should have been, were it not for fucking JB, and for fucking Malcolm, who so unquestioningly followed everything JB said, every stupid, half-formed idea, and for fucking Jude as well, for last night, for the past nine years, for hurting himself, for not letting himself be helped, for frightening and unnerving him, for making him feel so useless: for everything.

For a while they screamed; they pounded their feet on the rooftop in the hopes that someone beneath them, one of their three neighbors whom they’d still never met, might hear them. Malcolm suggested throwing something at the windows of one of the neighboring buildings, but they had nothing to throw (even their wallets were downstairs, tucked cozily into their coat pockets), and all the windows were dark besides.

“Listen,” Jude said at last, even though the last thing Willem wanted to do was listen to Jude, “I have an idea. Lower me down to the fire escape and I’ll break in through the bedroom window.”

The idea was so stupid that he initially couldn’t respond: it sounded like something that JB would imagine, not Jude. “No,” he said, flatly. “That’s crazy.”

“Why?” asked JB. “I think it’s a great plan.” The fire escape was an unreliable, ill-conceived, and mostly useless object, a rusted metal skeleton affixed to the front of the building between the fifth and third floors like a particularly ugly bit of decoration—from the roof, it was a drop of about nine feet to the landing, which ran half the width of their living room; even if they could safely get Jude down to it without triggering one of his episodes or having him break his leg, he’d have to crane over its edge in order to reach the bedroom window.
“Absolutely not,” he told JB, and the two of them argued for a bit until Willem realized, with a growing sense of dismay, that it was the only possible solution. “But not Jude,” he said. “I will.”

“You can’t.”

“Why? We won’t need to break in through the bedroom, anyway; I’ll just go in through one of the living-room windows.” The living-room windows were barred, but one of them was missing, and Willem thought he might be able to squeeze between the remaining two bars, just. Anyway, he’d have to.

“I closed the windows before we came up here,” Jude admitted in a small voice, and Willem knew that meant he’d also locked them, because he locked anything that could be: doors, windows, closets. It was reflexive for him. The bedroom window’s lock was broken, however, so Jude had fashioned a mechanism—a complex, blocky thing made from bolts and wire—that he claimed secured it completely.

He had always been mystified by Jude’s hyper-preparedness, his dedication to finding disaster everywhere—he had long ago noticed Jude’s habit of, upon entering any new room or space, searching for the nearest exit and then standing close to it, which had initially been funny and then, somehow, became less so—and his equal dedication to implementing preventative measures whenever he could. One night, the two of them had been awake late in their bedroom, talking, and Jude had told him (quietly, as if he was confessing something precious) that the bedroom window’s mechanism could in fact be opened from the outside, but that he was the only one who knew how to unjam it.

“Why are you telling me this?” he’d asked.

“Because,” Jude had said, “I think we should get it fixed, properly.”

“But if you’re the only one who knows how to open it, why does it matter?” They didn’t have extra money for a locksmith, not to come fix a problem that wasn’t a problem. They couldn’t ask the superintendent: After they had moved in, Annika had admitted that she technically wasn’t allowed to sublet the apartment, but as long as they didn’t cause any problems, she thought the landlord wouldn’t bother them. And so they tried not to cause problems: they made their own repairs, they patched their own walls, they fixed the plumbing themselves.

“Just in case,” Jude had said. “I just want to know we’re safe.”

“Jude,” he’d said. “We’re going to be safe. Nothing’s going to hap-
pen. No one’s going to break in.” And then, when Jude was silent, he sighed, gave up. “I’ll call the locksmith tomorrow,” he’d said.

“Thank you, Willem,” Jude had said.

But in the end, he’d never called.

That had been two months ago, and now they were standing in the cold on their roof, and that window was their only hope. “Fuck, fuck,” he groaned. His head hurt. “Just tell me how to do it, and I’ll open it.”

“It’s too difficult,” Jude said. By now they had forgotten Malcolm and JB were standing there, watching them, JB quiet for once. “I won’t be able to explain it.”

“Yeah, I know you think I’m a fucking moron, but I can figure it out if you only use small words,” he snapped.

“Willem,” said Jude, surprised, and there was a silence. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I know,” he said. “Sorry. I know.” He took a deep breath. “Even if we were to do this, though—and I don’t think we should—how would we even lower you down?”

Jude walked to the edge of the roof, which was bordered on each side by a flat-topped shin-high wall, and peered over it. “I’ll sit on the wall looking out, directly above the fire escape,” he said. “Then you and JB should both sit by it. Each of you hold one of my hands with both of your own, and then you’ll lower me down. Once you can’t reach anymore, you’ll let go and I’ll drop the rest of the way.”

He laughed, it was so risky and dumb. “And if we did this, how would you reach the bedroom window?”

Jude looked at him. “You’re going to have to trust I can do it.”

“This is stupid.”

JB stopped him. “This is the only plan, Willem. It’s fucking freezing out here.”

And it was; only his rage was keeping him warm. “Have you not noticed his whole fucking arm is completely bandaged up, JB?”

“But I’m fine, Willem,” said Jude, before JB could respond.

It was ten more minutes of the two of them bickering until Jude finally marched back over to the edge. “If you won’t help me, Willem, Malcolm will,” he said, although Malcolm looked terrified as well.

“No,” he said, “I will.” And so he and JB knelt and pressed themselves against the wall, each holding one of Jude’s hands with both of
their own. By now it was so cold that he could barely feel his fingers close around Jude’s palm. He had Jude’s left hand, and all he could sense anyway was its cushion of gauze. As he squeezed it, an image of Andy’s face floated before him, and he was sick with guilt.

Jude pushed off the side of the ledge, and Malcolm gave a little moan that ended in a squeak. Willem and JB leaned over as far as they could, until they were in danger of tipping over the edge themselves, and when Jude called to them to let go, they did, and watched him land in a clatter on the slat-floored fire escape beneath them.

JB cheered, and Willem wanted to smack him. “I’m fine!” Jude shouted up to them, and waved his bandaged hand in the air like a flag, before moving over to the edge of the fire escape, where he pulled himself up onto its railing so he could start untangling the implement. He had his legs twined around one of the railing’s iron spindles, but his position was precarious, and Willem watched him sway a little, trying to keep his balance, his fingers moving slowly from numbness and cold.

“Get me down there,” he said to Malcolm and JB, ignoring Malcolm’s fluttery protests, and then he went over the edge himself, calling down to Jude before he did so his arrival wouldn’t upset his equilibrium.

The drop was scarier, and the landing harder, than he had thought it would be, but he made himself recover quickly and went over to where Jude was and wrapped his arms around his waist, tucking his leg around a spindle to brace himself. “I’ve got you,” he said, and Jude leaned out over the edge of the railing, farther than he could have done on his own, and Willem held on to him so tightly that he could feel the knuckles of Jude’s spine through his sweater, could feel his stomach sink and rise as he breathed, could feel the echo of his fingers’ movements through his muscles as he twisted and unkinked the twigs of wire that were fastening the window into its stile. And when it was done, Willem climbed onto the railing and into the bedroom first, and then reached out again to pull Jude in by his arms, careful to avoid his bandages.

They stood back on the inside, panting from the effort, and looked at each other. It was so deliciously warm inside this room, even with the cold air gusting in, that he at last let himself feel weak with relief. They were safe, they had been spared. Jude grinned at him then, and he grinned back—if it had been JB before him, he would’ve hugged him out of sheer stupid giddiness, but Jude wasn’t a hugger and so he didn’t. But then Jude raised his hand to brush some of the rust flakes out of
his hair, and Willem saw that on the inside of his wrist his bandage was stained with a deep-burgundy splotch, and recognized, belatedly, that the rapidity of Jude’s breathing was not just from exertion but from pain. He watched as Jude sat heavily on his bed, his white-wrapped hand reaching behind him to make sure he would land on something solid.

Willem crouched beside him. His elation was gone, replaced by something else. He felt himself weirdly close to tears, although he couldn’t have said why.

“Jude,” he began, but he didn’t know how to continue.

“You’d better get them,” Jude said, and although each word came out as a gasp, he smiled at Willem again.

“Fuck ‘em,” he said, “I’ll stay here with you,” and Jude laughed a little, although he winced as he did so, and carefully tipped himself backward until he was lying on his side, and Willem helped lift his legs up onto the bed. His sweater was freckled with more flecks of rust, and Willem picked some of them off of him. He sat on the bed next to him, unsure where to begin. “Jude,” he tried again.

“Go,” Jude said, and closed his eyes, although he was still smiling, and Willem reluctantly stood, shutting the window and turning off the bedroom light as he left, closing the door behind him, heading for the stairwell to save Malcolm and JB, while far beneath him, he could hear the buzzer reverberating through the staircase, announcing the arrival of the evening’s first guests.