

Chapter 1 - Christian Munch

“U.N. LEGISLATORS APPROACHING AGREEMENT on LAND DISSEMINATION”

“FLOATING MOROCCAN GENDARMERIE GARRISON INTERCEPT ROGUE

IMMIGRANT PANGA, WOMEN STARVING & CHILDREN DEAD”

“THE EIGHTH NATURAL WONDER OF THE WORLD? OR JUST PERFORMANCE

ART?”

“KAUFMAN LIVES!”

“And remember, folks, we are broadcasting here live, right here from a CNBC chopper hovering just about a kilometer east of the landmass renowned scientists and academic researchers agree is a ‘geological marvel.’”

“ICYMI: Beleaguered Hip-Hop Icon Kanye West Announces Tour, including 12/11 performance on new land. COLLEGE DROPOUT RUMORED TO BE PERFORMED IN FULL. Link in bio.”

“Please turn that off.”

“And parents, let’s just think about this: would you really want your children-”

“Background noise is a source of spiritual and intellectual energy for me. I need it on. Or rather, I like it. Unless you’re interested in the premium package.”

“Uh-huh. So anyway....”

“Hmm?”

“CHICKEN FRIES ARE BACK, BUT THE KING...” [An empty white void. A plastic-mold cast in the form of the Burger King ‘King’ mascot levitates toward the screen, upon its countenance a wide yet paradoxically expressionless grin. The king was retired for about four

months until a viral social media campaign initiated by a 12 year-old boy at a Wendy's in Fort Scott, KS—notably proliferated by whatever scab at Warner continues out of obligation to operate the Captain Beefheart Instagram account—forced Burger King's hand.]

“Your reputation...I'm just curious. Be honest with me, let's just be real for a second.”

“BURGER KING: THE TASTE THAT'S HERE TO STAY.”

[Inundated by a non-ceasing barrage of tweets which arrived with what could only be described with any degree of accuracy as “impressive, *ambrosial* even in pace,” the Burger King social media team who had recently been beefed up (their words) in anticipation of the impending shitstorm staged a walkout, organized in a private Discord server. Anyone caught crossing the picket line was—and rightfully so—labelled a scab. Even after incumbent Burger King CEO Daisuke Ueda announced a reversal of the decision at an emergency all-hands at BK's new tax-haven HQ in Singapore, unionization discussions continue in wavering levels of intensity.]

“I'm nothing if not wholly authentic. It's my job, really.”

“Yeah, right. I mean, see, that's the thing. I'm just...are you really good at this or just, like, “career-good?”

Christian Munch. Thirty-four, white (he identifies “Caucasian”), grew up bouncing back and forth between his English oil magnate father Trent Munch (deceased; the last name's a whole thing) on Staten Island and his Polish mother Dajana Kaczmarek (estranged), who dipped on multiple occasions into Christian's college fund throughout divorce proceedings to keep on the best, most respected lawyers (though they identified “barrister”), they of the highest renown, apparently. Her sister Marianne, Christian's aunt (also estranged) knew these lawyers from her hours spent in court for a litany of dull misdemeanors. Marianne knew what was best for

Christian because she spent a lot of time with Christian, and therefore she must know what is best for Christian. Christian has survived solely off of what's left of his father's estate and the odd consulting job here and there, his lack of educational credentials having seemingly virtually no effect on his employability. Christian plays water polo and likes to drink dark Cuban coffee every so often.

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Of course. Never the mind, forget I said anything."

"You know, I think I'll just turn the TV off for now."

"Excellent—I mean, thank you. Maybe it'll help you, say, tap into different energies? That's a good turn of phrase, yeah?"

"Absolutely, young man. Positively so."

María Camila Rosario Velázquez, roughly his age sat opposite Christian in a red and black chevroned Bergère, garish in its peripheral contrast. It was by far the most expensive thing which she thought she should probably get rid of but it gives the place the color of *bourgeoise* so who was she to toss it streetside? The two sat together alone in her single bedroom halfway down the leftward hallway on the fourth floor of a nameless apartment complex; only cars and more buildings for a view so she'd kept the window closed to keep a light vibe. Apartment lit only by that shimmering LED phosphorescent, audio low but not low enough. She thought of it as *ambience*, soundscapes as the architecture for communication and connection.

Jimmy Carter stood at a mahogany podium in front of the Washington Monument—he having been sent on behalf of a U.S. incumbent—to deliver an impassioned if charmingly methodical soliloquy ("speech" was a bit of a stretch) on the importance of ethical outreach through practical

foreign policy as it pertained to the matter that's really on everyone's mind lately. Christian slumped forward off his stool to attempt to power down the set, clawing at every margin of the screen in search for an off switch. He'd only end up making it louder. Pres. Carter coughed and a nice blonde lady gripping his left arm wiped up a splotch of spittle trailing down his left lapel. Christian returned to his partway fetal stance on the partway uncomfortable barstool. María continued scribbling her grocery list on graph paper at such an angle that Christian would have to strain himself to notice. She crossed her legs the other way, pretending not to notice anything. Christian's eyes darted down toward the nether regions of her teal gored skirt for a thread of a second within the window that the two legs were about even-keel spatially speaking and ping-ponged back up vaguely to her face. She pretended not to notice.

"Pardon me if this is unprofessional, but..."

"Hmm?"

"I just, I have to know...what was it like?"

Christian looked down at a carpet stain and folded his hands. His palms didn't so much meet as they did collide. This was after all a safe space for communication. He really wanted to communicate a sense that her outright asking, nay, *prodding* him for the provenance both literal and metaphysical of this current condition was rude, to say nothing of his thoughts on her abilities as a *hostess*.

"You know, I'm actually really glad you asked that. No need to beat around the bush with me.

I'm like an open book."

María's tense jotting devolved from blasé prose to manic scribbles, sinuous in their particular degree of revolution and locomotion. Christian more or less thought she could just write really fast. He smiled.

"I mean, how to put it to words, you know?"

María's eyes and wrist went for a moment still, foot still bobbing some inches off the carpet. One vibration from the peak of her rightward thigh. She could paint a vague picture of whatever she'd be dealing with later by the number of vibrations. Here we go again.

"Emotional catharsis, some would call it. But I'm not so literary these days."

Keep it together, old gal. How many times have we talked about this? It's simple: inhale, exhale.

A simple rhythm in purely musical terms, one that's easy to remember. And thereby easy to forget. María had actually managed to catch herself paying some modicum of attention to Christian in this, in a word, *lugubrious* tableau, a setting which was not suited to accommodating clear, open communication and though. Instead she sat there faking it till she was making it opposite him just kind of doing the same but with quarter of a Snickers bar helping to quell whatever storm be it spiritual or otherwise he was fending in the crevices of his mind. When she looked at him she saw only a tabula rasa, dead-eyed and seemingly so lost within himself that she had to as any responsible practitioner of the psychiatric fields would wonder and through body language alone pontificate on just what the hell was this guy's deal, anyway? She had no snacks of her own because she profered to Christian the last of her snack jar in the form of that Snickers bar she was saving for a special occasion but figured in the moment that it was the right thing to do as a not just a businessperson but a *hostess* because in this line of work frankly you can't afford to be just one thing, you have to make sure you're diversifying. Specialization was

the textbook of the short-sighted, and it turned out María could do a ton equipped with only (one) black pen and some graph paper. Some college-ruled too for when she ran out of graph paper for all the calculus homework she wasn't doing. She figured her passing grade in Algebra II from a few years back would be able to carry her through Calc I, and for a while it managed to get the job done. All this she thought of in an instant of a moment, one so fleeting you could hardly call it "time." Her scribbling had reverted back to writing, though in that unmoment staring past Christian's shoulder she couldn't quite be sure what; she hadn't noticed she was doing it again in the first place. María's legs drooped a bit downward so that Christian could if he were so curious get a general idea of what exactly María had been doing to that poor single sheet of graph paper. "But then again, frankly, I know what I saw. And what I saw, what I heard, what I tasted, I felt...I felt it was wondrous. It was sort of like that moment when you're reading a great book, which I know I said I'm not so literary these days but once in a while I get a hankering because I know *that feeling*, that feeling when it all just sort of clicks and you're not so much reading as you are travelling down a page. It's like you're on a trip, but the vacation's not real. But also it is. You know what I mean? Do you understand what I'm talking about? I wouldn't blame you if you didn't. I mean, frankly, how could you? You weren't there. You weren't there. You can never know what it's like. Okay, let me try it this way. Have you ever been on a walk through a crowded part of town? Like, a burrough somewhere and maybe there's some kind of event or party going on or whatever. You've never been there, but for some reason there's people you know, and they're all around. And they're all talking about whatever and that part's whatever. It's somewhere you've never been, and yet, *and yet....*"

"What's that, Smokey? *Gasps*, a fire in Yellowstone? But how do you know!?"

“It’s like, you know it. I mean, we’ve all been there, yeah?”

Another vibration at the thigh happened while Christian was going on and on about this. Just one. Sigh. Followed by two, which in that case anything goes. Smokey the Bear roars while two children pantomime understanding its weirdly intense snarls. Another round of editing could have done this bit well.

“And so you’re walking, and people are talking at you and waving. And the talking, it’s not important. I don’t even remember hearing precisely they were saying. But at the same time, I felt it. Do you understand what I’m saying? Are you really with me, Miss...?”

“Smokey wants to know: do you know your drills? Are you looking out for smoke plumes?”

“You can just call me María, sweetie, if that’s what you’d like. And yes, I know what you mean. I think everybody’s been through something similar. I’m with you.” Yet she was nowhere.

“Maybe I was wrong about you, Miss Mare Eee Uh. Maybe you do know what I’m talking about. That’s the problem, see. Most people just couldn’t get it, or they couldn’t be arsed to listen. Most people just don’t give a fuck. So anyway, like I was saying, it’s like, you’re walking, right?”

A tune she’d heard once recently came on in María’s head. It had saxophones and xylophones and a sample of a megalodon (it sounded more like a whale to her untrained ears but the liner notes specifically referred to it as a megalodon) racing against the East Australian Current to its very best ability and electric guitars and a synth bass, along with a snappy vocal hook. It was delightfully modern music to a ‘T’ though she couldn’t quite place the artist.

“...and what frightens me most is I can’t tell if the place was real. I couldn’t remember if it was somewhere I’d been before a place I’d imagined.”

“But, you were there, correct?”

“That’s right.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Which part?”

“...ARE BACK, BUT THE KING NEVER LEFT.”

People screwed up the pronunciation of María’s name pretty much all the time, but something about this particular instance which she had just finished processing in her head as an event which had occurred just moments ago really pinched a nerve. She couldn’t tell if it was in the particular humdrum inflection with which Mr. Munch had surely out of a clandestine bout of spite and bile that really did her in or if the man just had a certain *je ne sais quoi* to him as her World Lit. professor would say with a twist of the neck and a smirk that reads, “I know something you don’t know.” Usually people say that things they don’t fully understand have a *je ne sais quoi* because they like the thing but don’t quite possess the critical vocabulary with which to adequately assess the thing. But María had a certain tenacity to her which—in the right company—allowed her to bend the contours of grammar and vernacular to her every whim. She had to be careful, though; some would just call her wrong.

The spartan interior decorating work on display in her dainty apartment wasn’t particularly soundproofed. But his pronunciation of her name seemed to bounce off the walls, occasionally clacking María over the head with just the right speed that it didn’t hurt, you couldn’t see someone over these words, but they were there, buzzing about like a fly you can’t quite swat,

like the backwash of an awfully sordid meal, something worse than rejection's guttural sting. And what was that "career-good" comment all about, then? Another vibration. At first, she took the remark in good faith, though María had employed every trick in the book (a literal marketing book she purchased off Amazon with her free 2-day shipping, crucial because if the book came a day later she'd likely lose interest in the whole endeavor; plus it's just nice to have) to put on an appearance of reputability and experience. Christian was her sole client in practice only. She didn't think anybody would openly and to her face question her abilities as a therapist—arbiter? good listener? it was a work-in-progress—the nerve! The inhumanity! If Christian Munch thinks he can just waltz up in here and ask to see her business credentials, then he's got another thing coming!

"Do you watch the news much? We've all been interviewed before. We all saw something different. It's crazy, I know!"

María doesn't much watch the news so much as she absorbs it. The TV is always on because the TV is all there is now. She hates social media (and by extension the Internet) and all the cultural detritus associated with it because she considers herself old-fashioned, but in that particularly off-kilter way that a millennial would consider themselves old-fashioned: she has a *Nevermind* poster and has held on to her *Event Horizon* ticket stub because you never really know, you know? María has not liked or shared a post in years. That nebulous blur of a period of time before Paul went missing was when she texted her last "LOL", though to who she can't quite remember. She got a new number and a new phone to go along with that new number. She didn't bother buying a phone case because if it breaks, who cares? After all, she doesn't need it.

Christian Munch is asking for another Snickers bar. You consider telling him that only the first

snack was complementary, included with the baseline package he'd already paid for and if he wants more he can upgrade to the premium package which you have a general, vague idea about the grand picture of but it's a bit touch-and-go at this point and you're waiting for someone to bite before we cross that bridge. María Camila Rosario Velázquez is generally not a fan of irony and has not read a modern book that isn't one of the *Harry Potter*'s.

Another vibration. That makes four, and at this point—unfortunately—it can no longer be helped.

“Oh my God! I've left the oven on this entire time! Please excuse me, but please keep talking to me. I'm taking in every single word.”

She gets up out of the chevroned Bergère. The upholstery is fresh, memory foam (special-ordered); it absorbed the totality of her weight. The construction work on the chair is fine in the *haute couture* understanding of the word, so much so that even aloof Christian notices the cushion's reverberant bounce upon María's quick retreat from it. Barefoot, she nearly trips on a crack in the kitchen tile.

“I don't know how to say this part without crying. You ever have something like that?”

María is pressing buttons on the oven as if her life depended on it, with one hand, cell phone (flip phone because that's all she needs) in the other.

“Oh, trust me, I know that feeling better than anyone, sweet baby.”

¿¿¿HEY, ERES TARDE??????

“What's your story, just out of curiosity?”

¿¿¿DÓNDE ESTÁS???

Old reliable: “My abuelita passed away a few years ago. I can’t think about it without crying.”

LLÁMAME AHORA

“Oh wow, that’s so terribly sad. I’m very sorry to hear that. Losing someone close to you is always so terrible.”

¡ESTÁS EN ELLA!

“Everything smooth in there?”

“Shit...”

“Wrong room for that, innit? Aha ha.”

PLEASE DON’T TOUCH ANYTHING UNTIL I’M THERE.

“Abuelita like your niece or what’s that about?”

María places the phone back into the tight gap between her thigh and skirt’s topmost orifice and heads back to the living room—not a particularly lengthy distance from there to the kitchen but enough so that one can at least devise in their head some veneer of privacy. Munch is babbling on about his story some more. It’s not necessarily that his story isn’t in some way interesting; she’s heard it before. It’s true that she already knew who Munch was from when his father had been caught embezzling funds away from an ill-fated water purification and restoration charity started by a concerned eight year-old to offshore accounts. It’s also true that she had indeed caught one of his several interviews on the subject on everybody’s mind.

“It’s kind of a relief, honestly. I feel like it’s better me telling you with you not already knowing than the other way around. The Isle of Dreams, some call it. I’ve no need for names personally. For me, it’ll forever be associated with an image and a feeling.”

María powers off the TV. “So, it wasn’t just walking, then?”

With the TV off, María and Christian could if they were so inclined hear all the aberrant creaks, screeches, hums, whistles, hoots and hollers an apartment complex and all its constituent folks are making at any given moment. But after the slight buffer period (or perhaps out of interest in delaying the stern talking to she knows she’s to receive later on) María found herself intently focused on listening to any and all things Christian had to say on the Isle of Dreams, which she had never once heard it referred to as, though again she’s not much one for the headlines.

“Walking? Fuckin’ hell, I wouldn’t be here paying top dollars over a pleasant stroll through the park, now would I?” Base package. “I saw a future. Not mine exclusively, mind you, but a future with me in it. But things were different, and not just the difference years can do to a person. No, this seemed like maybe a different world. Stuff was the same. You had trees and plants and grass and cute little birds flying around and even a nice banquet laid out for me in a pleasant air-conditioned dining room, very British Victorian, classical feel. It was all the same, but at the same time, it was totally different. Everything was extraordinary. All the little shit. I felt like I was seeing and touching grass for the first time. I want to go around to every tree-hugging little shit out there and tell him that they haven’t even seen the real deal. They haven’t really experienced nature, they’ve just been in it. That’s what that place really is. It was the same trees, but they were new. It made me realize something: this could be our world. This could be the future. This could be something real and something worth living for but nobody’s fighting for it. And they’re not fighting for it because they don’t know about it, and they can never know about it unless they experience it firsthand.”

“Hmm. Well, that is a lot to take in.”

“You do believe me, right?”

Another vibration. María ignores it.

“Well, you were there. Of course I believe you. I’ve no reason not to.”

“Well, when you put it that way...”

Christian turns his head out the window and sits in silence. Tears well up in his eyes but don’t quite string down his face. The droning from the A/C unit sticking out of the window occupies the negative space their silence conjures. María simply lets the moment happen.

“Are you so sure it was the future?”

Christian says nothing. He continues to stare out the window toward another apartment complex across W. Norris. Through a window over there, one can see a young white boy practicing a dance trendy amongst young black men. He’s almost got it but something’s not quite right.

“Maybe it really was just a vision of...something. Like an apparition or a ghost. Do you believe in ghosts? Are you religious at all?” She knew Christian likely wasn’t but this early on since the appearance of the island nothing’s off the table.

“...There’s something I neglected to mention. I saw my ex-wife. I used to be married. Did you know that? I know it got reported on a little bit. That was back when dad was still around. He actually attended the wedding. I was so surprised that he bothered to show up. I almost didn’t send an invitation. I figured he’d probably be at some big corporate get-together or meeting with shareholders or golfing or on a yacht or something. He was big into that kinda stuff. He played the part really well, I’ve gotta say. But he wanted to get to know her. That’s why he showed up to the wedding. It wasn’t for me. He was sizing her up. He ruined the wedding. How is that even possible? Who is so wicked that they could ruin the happiest day of a person’s life? It was like an

interrogation. He thought Angela was marrying me to get to him. Like a fucking spy. Movie theater shit. Can you believe that? The audacity of some people. We didn't talk much before the wedding, so I had no idea. But the day comes, he grabs the mic from my best man's speech and starts going on and on about keeping your friends close but your enemies closer and schmoozing with the right people to get what you want, all the while I saw his eyes locked right at her the entire time. A hundred guests, but she was his only audience. We got divorced a couple years later. I never was able to shake the feeling that, and I'm not blameless, look, I ain't perfect, I'll admit I started some fights, she started some too, it's a two-way street, but I always had this thought like: was it doomed from the start? Did dad fucking fuck me in the arse that day? We haven't spoken since. I still can't believe it. It was the most unreal thing to ever happen to me, I mean, of course, aside from the island."

"Do you want some water?"

"Yes, please. And you can turn the teley back on if you'd like. I don't mind."

"I'd actually rather not if that's okay with you." María strolls back to the kitchen to pick the two of them up some bottled waters.

"Marianne—sorry, that's my auntie; we don't speak much these days—honestly, she was right about him. Before the wedding, we weren't talking and...fuckin' hell, I'm paying by the minute here. Where was I?"

"You'd seen your ex-wife on the island, you said."

"Oh, yeah! Well...it's more complicated than that. It's like she was there, but she wasn't really. I could walk up and touch her, though I'm sure you'd understand I was reticent to. But it was like, when I did, it was like...you mentioned ghosts. I was the ghost in this story. I could feel them but

nobody seemed to notice me. It was the strangest thing. I felt truly lost. And even though I was some sort of phantom to them, I'd never felt more exposed in my entire life. I can't explain it, this thing. It..."

Christian cuts himself off. María could tell there was something else on his mind of crucial importance which he lacked the words, composure, or otherwise to adequately explain. Even if she could never see what he saw, even if she were to visit the island herself someday, she knew by the expression on his face, his trembling hands, that familiar sensation of being at once there with the person next to you whilst in another world entirely; she'd been to all those places, sometimes all at once. Epiphany. María didn't have any sort of special insight into the human condition; anybody could read what was plain to see, written all over Christian's face. She thought maybe that's why Christian's account was so affecting; it was extraordinary only in terms of its extenuating circumstances. You couldn't explain the why, but the what was only a few sentences, potent in the right hands.

"It changed my life. I knew something had to give."

María had caught many interviews with the platoon of men and women who were sent to the island a few weeks back when it first appeared overnight. Operation Phoenix. Clips pulled from news station testimonials with the members of the expedition played repeatedly on every news station on every public television ad nauseum. The day it appeared was one of *those* moments, the kind where everybody stops what they're doing for at least a couple hours to gather around any and all screens to harness the IV catheter of information—mostly wrong—on the island and the U.N.'s collaborative investigation of it.

"After going through the interview, I—this is all confidential, right?"

“Scout’s honor.”

“I faked mental illness, psychosis, to try and get honorable discharge. It worked. I couldn’t believe it. I had everybody completely fooled. There wasn’t anything wrong with me! In fact, I knew it was everybody else that was out of their mind. Even the others, I couldn’t be sure they could be trusted. We all went back on separate boats. I never found out what they know.

Everything was buttoned up, all the i’s dotted and t’s crossed. On some Area 51 shit. I’ve never seen anything like it. And honestly...I wanna go back. Nothing’s been the same since. Food doesn’t taste as good, drink just gives me headaches, pussy—sorry, sex isn’t the same. I come and it’s like, okay cool, what now? This was experience beyond experience. You know that movie *The Sixth Sense*? Okay, yeah, I know it’s on the nose, but fuck it, I know what I saw. This was the sixth sense. I don’t know if people should be allowed back in there. I wanna go back so fucking bad.”

María sat quietly. She had graduated from manic scribbles to actually writing down the things Christian was saying. She felt for the first time in months enrichment. Purposeful, even.

“I’d fucking dump my savings into that island.”

“I see.”

Christian stood up from his seat. He pulled out a black leather wallet from his back pocket—had he been sitting on that thing this whole time? Bad for your back. At this age, you have to learn to care about those sorts of things. It was a fat one, too. María’s confusion was palpable.

“You already paid. You pay ahead of time. That’s how this works.”

“I know. But...thank you. I really needed this. Or something like it.”

He pulled out three one-hundred dollar bills and shoved them into María's hands. Christian is a strange man, María thought. One of those can't take no for an answer types. María's professional disguise was ripped and torn on the floor. She looked like she'd just shook the hand of a movie star. Christian smiled with all his teeth for the first time since the two of them met. She understood why quickly; in stereotypically Briton fashion to a laughable degree, many of them were missing.

"Everybody needs somebody to talk to from time to time, sir."

Mr. Munch snatched his coat from off the scraggly carpet floor.

"I feel like nobody will ever truly understand where I'm coming from here. But yours was...real. It was earnest." He threw his coat on. It was August; Mr. Munch doesn't strike as the fashion over function type. All types. "Do you have a card?" "You already took it, remember? It's in your coat pocket."

"Ah, yes, right then. I have a feeling we'll meet again in some other life."

On any other day such a gesture might seem vague, but today María at least broadly understood where the sentiment was coming from. If nothing else, she felt as if their conversation had left her with a pickaxe or some such other tool to break ground and reveal something trembling in wait beneath the surface of her thoughts, may she yet bloom. With a light smile and a nod, Christian Munch left María Camila Rosario Velázquez's flat for the first and last time, closing the door behind him, headed this way or that with the prospect of finding something different, more true, whatever that might be.

Warmth. That was the feeling. Maybe she'd remember this mundane little thing forever. Mamá was waiting for her at Eisley's down on 4th. She grabbed her purse—he hadn't stolen anything,

right?—checked it for the essentials, not stopping to slip into something more comfortable.

María exited through the apartment door headed left to Christian’s right turn. Half an hour later, her phone rang on vibrate, its faint sound muted full stop by the Bergère’s impeccable upholstery work.

Chapter 2 - Lunch Date

“Hey, no cursing in here!”

[DEADHEDRED37] lol can u believe this shit

[shesellsbeesgills] no...actuly yeah

“It’s not even 2 P.M.! So that’s no cursing from you, you scab!”

“No scab!”

“I see’s a scab and you’s a scab ya scab!”

[DEADHEDRED37] what’s a scab

[afxfn4.82454201] What are you guys talking about?

[shesellsbeesgills] idk google it

“You’re lucky you spend so much damn money here ya hog, I oughta kick you outta here! And don’t you forget it’s my restaurant!”

“And this hog’s ordering the Sunday special! Extra pepper this time!”

“Mom, it is his restaurant...”

“You never put extra pepper every time I ask for it!”

“I’m getting the Grand Slam. Eggs over medium, bacon crispy but not burnt-”

“We ain’t got no fu-we ain’t got no Grand Slam.”

[afxfn4.82454201] OXFORD: A dry, rough protective crust that forms over a cut or wound during healing. MERRIAM-WEBSTER: a contemptible person. DICTIONARY.COM: a. a disease of plants characterized by crustlike lesions on the affected parts and caused by a fungus or bacterium. b. one of these crustlike lesions. WIKIPEDIA: uhhh a lot of different definitions.

“You know what the child means, pendejo.”

“This ain’t baseball and this definitely ain’t no penn jilette.”

afxfn4.82454201 is typing

[shesellsbeesgills] lol ur fast. sry eating

[DEADHEDRED37] soon and im fuckin hungry as shit

[shesellsbeesgills] no cussing lmfao

I love how your eyes close, whenever you kiss me. And when I'm away from you, I love how you miss me...

“Skip.”

“I hope you're all hungry. 'Cause this is it. Social Security's dryin' up. Not gonna see a cent from me anymore, no sir and no ma'am.”

...to the place, I belong. West Virginia...

“Skip.”

[afxfn4.82454201] So I've been thinking a lot about the way Veronica's arc ended last season and I think I get now why it wasn't working so much for me? Basically feel like her break-up was so...forced? idk? Like the writers on this show REALLY don't want women to be happy ya know? Like I'd KILL to be a fly on the wall in the writer's room, it just seems like every time a woman is approaching something resembling happiness there's just some BS. First it was Hermione and Hiram's divorce, then it was ANOTHER strife with B, then they turned her into a total klepto which is a whole other can of worms. Basically I just want this show to be like both more natural and true to the characters while at the same time not feeding total bullshit just cause, oh, that's how it is for women. Like fuck it has to be! Like why do we even bother with fiction? That's what it's supposed to be: fiction! It's not real! Not everything has to be real!

While my gui-

“F'in skip!”

[shesellsbeesgills] lol like 6 ep behind here chill

“Y’all been watchin’ the news?”

“No.”

“Only a little.”

“That’s it, that’s the—L, is for the way you look, at me...oh, darling, it’s for the only one I see...”

“Well why the h-e-double pocky sticks not?”

“Take my heart, oohhhh baby, please don’t, please don’t break it!”

“He can’t really sing well.”

[shesellsbeesgills] lmfao def not

[afxfn4.82454201] ??? I didn’t say anything lol

“I mainly read it online and stuff. Lot faster.”

“¡Su canto es completamente terrible!”

“Don’t talk witch a damn mouth full, woman!”

“I ain’t got nothin’ to chew yet! What’s taking so damn long, anyway?”

“No cursing!”

“You first!”

“Crazy bat. Five more minutes.”

[afxfn4.82454201] So do you guys agree with me or? thinking bout doing a longer write-up so don’t wanna look stupid lol

“Ah, good morning Mr. Jefferson!”

“Ay, young man!”

“Oh, outta here!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha! All the usuals, please.”

“I’ve never liked him...you oughta be keeping up more with the news. They’re saying it’s getting bigger. So very, very strange, don’t you think?”

“Sorry, Bernie, but the usual’s gone at the moment...that witch...how about the seat right over? Half price eggs, how’s about that?”

“Oh, Stevie, you sure do know to warm these old bones!”

“Is it even real? I’ve never seen it. And anyone can use Photoshop these days. I’ve been reading up on tutorials, so when I finally get it, I’ll be able to mock up signs for the shop.”

“It’s real. I mean, I’m pretty sure, at least.”

[shesellsbeesgills] actually made one, hold on lemme find it

“I called up, you remember, what’s her name...what’s her name? Dang it, I was just talking to her to her the other day, literally just talking to her about it... ¡Maldito sea!”

“So, the #6. Three minutes, tops, young man!”

[DEADHEDRED37] god this sucks

[shesellsbeesgills] img_080519_380710.png

“Alright, alright, Mrs. V Las Quest, here’s ya food. Made with extra love and no curses. Your eggs are comin’ right up, Camila. You sure you don’t want nothin’, Dani?”

“No, I’m fine, sir. Thanks, though.”

“Last check...” she said with a smirk.

“None.”

“None, what?”

[afxfn4.82454201] woah, that is super dope!

“None, please. None, thank you.”

...mountain mama, take me home...

“Goddamit!”

[DEADHEDRED37] wtf when did you make this

“...So anyway, her nephew was one of those guys onboard the first—or was it the second? One of the first groups to the island. And she told me that he had heard from somebody that he knows that’s there right now as we speak that they think it’s getting bigger.”

“Yours is just about ready, Mr. Jefferson!”

[shesellsbeesgills] lol thnk u. uh two days ago I think?

Well a simple kinda life never did me no harm...

“Sk-”

“A raisin' me a family and workin' on a farm!”

“They sure don’t write ‘em like they used to, am I right or am I right, Mr. Jefferson?”

“Bernie, the only thing you know better than cookin’s a good tune.”

“I got to thinking...”

“Mr. Jefferson, thank you kindly for saying such nice, good things.”

[afxfn4.82454201] Well, it’s really amazing! :)

[DEADHEDRED37] god

“Fact is, I just bought his greatest hits. That’s what I got on, right now. Remember CD’s?

Remember them old things? These young people don’t know a thing or two about those old things.”

“...I could be selling that kind of information! Like an anonymous...what’s the word...”

“Source?”

“No eso no es...”

Oh babe, I hate to go...

“That’s really the stuff, right there.”

[afx4.82454201] I’m completely lost lol. anyway g2g, exam tomorrow at 7 so gotta study :(later!

[afx4.82454201 has signed out]

“Valet? No...soiree? Fuck, no...”

“L...is for the way you look, at me...” under his breath.

[DEADHEDRED37] Do you know what she’s talking about?

“Français?¡Mierda!”

[shesellsbeesgills] six episodes behind, again. so no

“You thinking of liaison? Like an information courier!”

“You reek! That’s the one!”

[DEADHEDRED37] lol stfu. this is gonna turn into a thing huh

[shesellsbeesgills] yeppp

“Think about the millions! Millions and millions and millions!”

“You said it, sister! Stacks atop stacks atop stacks! You turnin’ around some?”

Why haven’t I told you? Oh, baby.

“Brilliant,” he said, po-faced.

“Quiet, you! She told me some other stuff, you know. Other things that are, like, really important. Things that I, that we, could, we should really be charging for.”

“Like?”

“Just really interesting things. Things that are really interesting and that we should really be charging for. It’s a gold mine. There’s gold everywhere, still, even today. It just came out of the ground. So I think we should really be charging for it.”

[shesellsbeesgills] lol this’ll never work.

[DEADHEDRED37] never in a million years

[shesellsbeesgills] how about in a million million years?

[DEADHEDRED37] not even in a million million, million years

“...and this one’s on the house, Mr. Jefferson!”

“Oh, Bernie, you shouldn’t have, you really shouldn’t...how’s the wife doing these days.”

“Oh, she’s just fine as could be, you know how it is with women. They never good, they fine, or they bad. You pick ‘em up, they look fine, they ain’t bad. But they ain’t good neither, ain’t good for nothin’, ain’t good for talkin’.” He went on, then they went on.

“I don’t remember what all she said, but you know that’s okay. You know why?”

Sigh. “Why?”

[shesellsbeesgills] are u hearin this right?

“Porque lo escribí. ¡Porque lo escribí!”

The eggs weren’t very good. They never were. “Mom, I’ve got a thing...another appointment.”

“Oh, you’re seeing somebody! Good, hija joven.”

“God, not like that, no.”

[shesellsbeesgills] oooo what’s his name?

“It’s...it’s like therapy, I guess.”

“Therapy? You?”

“Oh, goodness! You should have said something, hija. I could have covered any and all expenses.” Last check.

“Well, it’s...it doesn’t really cost...it’s too hard to explain here.” She gets up. “Maybe next week?”

“You can always call me, sweet baby.” She smiles for the first time today.

“Yeah, right.”

“And you will, hija?”

“Yeah, sure.”

[shesellsbeesgills] Imfo fuckin a you will

“And don’t come back now, you hear! Haha. I’m only jossin’ you.”

“These eggs, Bernie, my God! To die for. To. Die for!”

“No clue.”

“Oh now, Mr. Jefferson, I’ll bring out that half-off check in a jiff...”

“She’s always last in, first out. Children. Uh, so, plants, was it?”

María had already beelined her way out the door, tears welling up.

“That’ll be \$41.37, Misses Ve Las Quest E Own.”

Chapter 3 - Danielle Gray

“Would you repeat what you just said to me into the camera, please?”

“Does everyone do it this way? Is this how it was for Chris?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die.” María had just hours prior received her Canon DSLR, decked out with all the extra fittings like tripods of multiple lengths (a singular extensible one would make her seem more layperson than consummate professional, she figured), different lenses for a variety of occasions and visual affects (not that she would be filming anywhere than in her poorly lit apartment building), boom microphone, microphone (not boom), lens cleaner (liquid), lens cleaner (a linen cloth, ostentatious in color but to the touch reminding María of ribbons she’d received in elementary school for losing the spelling bee year after year), a cloth for lighting purposes (again, none much to report, and this thing was pretty much just a bedsheet); even a dolly because why not? Perhaps in her spare time with all this equipment in tow she’d be able to practice her camerawork and lavish these productions (her choice of word) with cinematic qualities one might spot in a film, or if that doesn’t work at the very least one might—once numerous productions had been filmed in the future, and she’ll get there when she can—be able to call the whole of this thing “prestige TV” for the “modern era”. *Experimental, avant-garde, daring*, she thought they might say. After all, surely she’d break even on the investment, a *long-term* investment, with the money she’d be making back from clients. Her expenditures at this stage of her life were low, what with the rinky-dink living conditions she’d accommodated for herself, and she wasn’t eating much these days: too many foods brought about troubling memories so María had summarily excised them from her diet without regard for any nutritional deficits she might incur from this sudden violent change. Plus: *free shipping*.

“If you say so.”

María hadn't the time to do much prodding at (she thought of it as 'experimenting with') the bountiful equipment. She'd already set up one of the tripods which seemed as if it were a good height for recording an interview (she thought of them as 'confessionals' if she'd just had her afternoon coffee, though the aim was always to keep things casual, or 'caj', which she'd heard through the grapevine young people were keen to say, though the question was: whose definition of 'young' was at play here? She made sure never to call these shindigs 'confessionals' out loud), not so tall that the camera might seem imposing to a person who was at once a client and a houseguest, yet not too short to appear comical and debasing.

“My name is Danielle Gray. I'm not from around here. I've worked in many different places. I'm so unfamiliar in fact that I don't really know what street I'm on. I just follow the turns my phone tells me to make. My favorite writer is Na-”

“Just the pertinent information is fine, Danielle. We'll get to everything in due time, dear.”

Her eyes averted away from the DSLR's draconian gaze back toward María. She nods and smiles. Danielle was popular with just about everybody. She had dark eyes you could tell secrets to knowing they'd never escape.

“Okay, got it. I think I understand what you're saying...”

Danielle was good in all the ways people consider goodness to be. Throughout elementary, middle and high school she was consistently listed amongst fellow exceptionals she mostly wasn't known to associate with out of social intimidation (the kind that folks would call 'endearing' if your GPA were high enough) at a grabbag of different schools from throughout

the country. She made the honor roll every year. She graduated each year of high school *summa cum laude* (a term she couldn't help but crack a sly smirk at every time it was muttered at her graduation ceremonies, much to the chagrin of her mother's omnipotent eyes). By her college years she'd managed to fabricate a version of herself who was hard-working and patient when she needed it to be yet sociable and outgoing when one was *supposed to be*, because you were in college and that's just what you do because that's how it's always been.

"I joined the Navy when I was 27. Now I'm 34. I retired as an MCPO—oh, sorry, Master Chief Petty Officer. It's been about seven weeks since my visit. That's what we were told to refer to them as."

But the two personas congealed like oil and water, because they were in fact one. One with two heads, but two heads attached to the same body. And they fought. They always fought. And Danielle's best friend, Marcus—who she'd grown up alongside through infancy to childhood and onward to early adolescence, whose eyes were keen to pinpoint any and all intonations in Danielle's mood and behavior—noticed.

"I was hesitant at first. I felt like...like, I didn't sign up for this kind of thing, you know? And when you serve, I mean, you're basically signing up for just about anything at that point. Even if you're the highest up, at some point you're still just a cog in the machine. That's what everyone would say all the time, but it was really true. But something about this just seemed different. It's like...that feeling when you think you're being watched, but you're not really being watched, you're just alone." She looks down, her eyelids drooping a bit. "And yet you are all the same."

Things got thrown. Words were said. Emotions high, hormones raging, testosterone pumping. It was ugly, the kind you can't take back no matter how hard you try. And the thing about it was how quickly it all seemed to happen. It was like, *snap*, and poof! Gone.

"I was nervous. I can't explain it. I'd been on so many ops at that point that it was beginning to be routine. I sort of felt like I was...treading water. Pardon the expression. Chris was there, of course. He was the one who filled me in on...this thing. Sorry, that was kind of rude. You know what I mean."

"It's fine. Please, continue."

In reality, the two had in tandem been working up to that fateful moment. When it came to deciding upon what college to attend, the two just had different things in mind. Marcus wanted to study biology, though he wasn't quite sure where the degree might take him at the post-graduate stage of things. It was less that Marcus was a scientist at heart and more that a biology degree was placating. Biology to him was the ur-field, one in which one could likely procure any future their heart desired given their smile were just so and their letters of recommendation just plentiful and superlative enough.

"So, you know, we're all human, right? And when I got called upon to join the special-ops group with people I wasn't familiar with for a mission that nobody had any idea about...frankly, any semblance of order, rank and file we were tacitly expected to commit to was just sort of abandoned. I mopped and swept the port deck even when it was cleaned. And the idea of somebody of my position doing that...God, that sounds so fucking pretentious. Sorry, am I allowed to curse?"

Danielle was hungry for change to levels of nearly absurdist parody. Her desires and aspirations resembled a walking, breathing Obama campaign ad. And even though neither of the two were keen to say it aloud, because like all friendships their's was at some core, primeval level a farce, that is, a farce in so much as one were cynical enough and bad-faithed in heart and spirit to not only consider but celebrate the complex taxonomy of peoples and their proximitive associations as nothing but completely random happenstance, they seemed okay. But okay does not a life make. And she wanted to explore the liberal arts.

“We were using a borrowed vessel to get there. I can't remember the name of it. There was an insistence that we travel there by boat. I know a lot of people have speculated about this, but I honestly don't have a clue why. By chopper would be faster plus you could land anywhere you want, not just along the shoreline. For some reason every constituent part of the operation seemed unimpeachable. Things were happening so quickly that you didn't have any time to question anything that you were doing because the important next thing that had to happen for a smooth operation had already happened and the step after that was on its way up. So, anyway, for the trip there I basically acted as that vessel's longshoreman. I figured if anything I could help a fellow shore patrol, since there usually just wasn't the time during normal hours for work like that to happen. And everyone's gotta sleep sometime.”

So Danielle was a friend to everybody, a friend in that certain way that one might offhandedly say because it's more polite a non-committal utterance than 'acquaintance.' Acquaintances go their separate ways; friends are just busy. Friends lose touch but keep on through invisible tethers. That's the trouble: you can't see them.

“I think a lot of people have misconceptions about what precisely that thing is. Lots of rumors. Some true, some not. Seen some good guesses. Some creative ones, for sure.”

María had a lot of trouble hiding her disinterest. If this were a movie she'd already seen, she'd just skip through to the good parts or better yet look them up online. That's just how she was wired. As with bougie Christian Munch, María knew Danielle Gray's entire story because it hadn't been the first time she'd told it, though Danielle was proficient at making it seem as if she had just minutes prior experienced it in that acutely academic way. If Ms. Gray were a professor, she'd make tenure, thought María.

Yet still her interest level in Danielle Gray—who was diagnosed with clinical anxiety after a panic attack in the middle of a Jamba Juice line, who shoved a white man preaching from a makeshift lectern off his perch for condoning ethnic cleansing, who got away with it vis-à-vis some quick thinking, who holds a world record, who stopped watching horror movies out of misplaced fear that the shock such films are engineered to produce may in fact actually kill her, who really, actually doesn't like coffee, who prefers tea, who is a survivor of sexual assault, who dropped out of college even though she had her whole life ahead of her but she's so resourceful that everybody agrees that she'll be able to make it work in the end and since everybody agrees about the matter because historically she's always been successful then surely it'll shake out that way and thus no amount of following-up on her mental and physical health would be required or even considered, who deleted her Facebook account because she wasn't getting enough likes on her posts and deactivated Instagram because they owned that shit too (but also it's nice to know it's still there), who met a couple nice guys but it just never really worked out like that, who stopped wanting to be viewed and started wanting to be seen—was tenuous at most. Mostly, she

smiled and knew, it was that María felt that developing a personal attachment to her clients would be unprofessional and probably cross some ethical line.

“...Personally, I tend to think about it in terms of architecture. In life, we don't possess a concept of creation, unless of course you're religious. The scientific laws ordained by history's greatest astronomers, biologists, astrophysicists, chemists, philosophers, and the such don't allow room for something like The Island's appearance. It's funny, there are...there's a word for this sort of thing, I think...manifold! That's the one. There are manifold, that sort of means various in a certain way, manifold phenomena which comfortably fit within the contours of scientific understanding. Things we, I'm talking about 'we' as in all of the scientific humanity, things we repeat to ourselves over and over until they're true. Or we think they're true, but we leave ourselves enough room for disproving evidence. Theories. But really, we all believe gravity to be definitively a truism or an axiom.” María was effectively asleep and manakin-esque. Eyes open, forward. “I sort of feel more interested in this angle on the Island: how it challenges our perceptions of science, more than what it actually does to a person.” She couldn't interrupt Danielle to ask her to quit burying the lede because she had already done that once before. “What any of us saw, to be honest, I never found it all that useful to dwell on. Because, there's this notion of imageability in different walks of philosophy, I won't get too much into it,” uh-huh, she thought, “...but it basically gestures toward this phenomenological property of things to conjure images. And I think we all have that particular field, to view it from a computational science perspective, set to different values. Confirmation bias.” María's curiosity perked up a tad. She was familiar with that phrasing. “...that we see what we want to see. Our eyes fixate on particular curiosities. Nobody reads things they're not interested in, easier and more worthwhile

in terms of life balance to just fail that particular course than trudge through the meaningless tedium.”

“So it’s all meaningless. I saw some ducks and a cat that looked like one I had when I was six.”

Silence filled the room. Thank God María had opened the window.

“So...is there anything else on your mind?”

Danielle makes a face that looks like a newspaper comic book character clutching in their nostrils a waft of flatulence.

“Nah, I think I’m good.”

Hands shake. Check’s in the mail. Two nods handcrafted by pageantry and austerity’s consummation. One foot out the door, the other supposed to be prepping for teardown. One more thing, she thought:

“That feeling when you’re looking for your keys and they’re in your hand. El oh el.”

The trestle stool’s leg was rotted and moldy. Free shipping, tho!

Chapter 4 - A Letter

To CM:

I never thanked you for what you did. Ever since, I've been in touch with the rest of the crew. Things are good, mostly because of that. Everything else, whatever. Honestly, I've been thinking about you. After all, you were my first client. In a weird way, you took a chance. I wouldn't have blamed you for saying no. It's strange. I feel like...do you ever feel as if you've known someone in a past life? It's like déjà vu times a hundred. Anyway, that's how I feel about you. And it's not...strong. I'm not getting pangs of...remembrance? There's probably a better word for that. I shouldn't be writing this. But I think, at least for now, that it makes sense to do. It's not romance. But it's more than just friendship, if that makes any sense. They should come up with a word for something like that. After all, it seems like everything's changing. I got gas today and it was a lot higher. I don't know why! Not that I'm the type to keep up with that sort of thing. At the same time, it was the first time I'd gotten gas in a few weeks, so. I'm not driving much these days. No need. At this age...you need the walks. Then you finally do fill your tank and...gosh, maybe it would be worth drilling on the Island. Do you think it's possible? You were there, I mean, you'd probably know better than anyone else. Maybe it'd be like a drug party. Everyone just trippin' and stuff. How would you even work there? I'm sure they'll figure something out. I hope you write back. Anyway, this is running long so...yeah. You've got my address.

María

Chapter 5 - 4chan

itt: island theories thread Anonymous 09/03/19(Tues)04:27:19 No.493065207: thread title

09/03/19(Tues)04:37:32 No.493065463: lol that's not what itt means

09/03/19(Tues)04:37:45 No.493065936: [>>493065207 \(Anonymous\) # OP adult virgin confirmed](#)

09/03/19(Tues)04:59:23 No.493067439: I've never seen it, so it doesn't exist

09/04/19(Tues)05:24:40 No.493069387: my brother lives there lol

09/04/19(Tues)05:37:01 No.493071001: [>>493069387](#) proof?

09/04/19(Tues)05:37:26 No.493071049: maybe real? Idk this whole thing strikes me as more media deflection

09/04/19(Tues)05:43:09 No.493071342: nah he lays trump gonna build wall around lmfao~~

09/04/19(Tues)05:44:00 No.493071348: [>>493071001](#) lemme just give u my social security number while im at it

09/04/19(Tues)05:47:00 No.493072004: It just looks like any old mangrove, I don't get what's the big deal.

09/04/19(Tues)05:47:13 No.493072006: y'all need a goddam mortgage then u know this ain't shit

09/04/19(Tues)05:48:57 No.493072217: so it that new COD any good or what

09/04/19(Tues)05:50:10 No.493072300: [>>493071348](#) ight lol hmu

09/04/19(Tues)05:55:37 No.493073109: this is fuckin fagget kike shit lm fao faggets

09/04/19(Tues)06:04:22 No.493074119: [>https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUHk9FLZMf4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUHk9FLZMf4)

[Embed]

09/04/19(Tues)06:07:10 No.493074320: >>493072004 IMO This is what makes this story so interesting, from a scientific level, at least. The island isn't even in the subtropics, let alone the tropics which ride along the equator. But those areas where mangroves are typical to grow. Yes, the island (and idk if we should even be calling it that but for the sake of simplicity we'll stick to "the island") is in saltwater, but that's not necessarily the full criteria by which mangrove grow. They tend to grow near shores. But the island's fully isolated, which is what I didn't really get at first: how could mangroves grow under conditions which we know based on scientific evidence mangroves cannot typically grow in? But that's when it hit me: there must be more land, and it's land that's always been there, and thus there's a shore for mangroves to grow alongside. It's so obvious! We just can't see it. This island in particular just decided to make itself known to us pleb humans. Or maybe it's shores plural?

09/04/19(Tues)06:08:21 No.493074339: >election hacked

>putin jailin everybody

>aliens don't exist

>deny hacking

>get away with anything and everything

it's not the russians

09/04/19(Tues)06:12:37 No.493074513: >>493072217 nah shit sucks

09/04/19(Tues)06:29:17 No.493081001: >>493074320 erm how does this account for the island expanding? if there truly were other invisible islands surrounding the perimeter of The Island and this one were growing at the rate it is (and it is growing so I don't wanna hear shit about this) then the island would quickly grow into the other islands, which doesn't make any sense.

Furthermore, if this island were merely a visible version of these, let's for the sake of argument call them "Growers" then the Growers would all collide with each other within a matter of days even if they had all just appeared today, and that doesn't even take into account the existence of realdeal known land masses and any conflicts therein. But this thing's been around for a few weeks now; surely at some point between then and now they would have collided. I'm just not sure your theory holds water.

09/04/19(Tues)06:43:20 No.493083987: if not drugs hardddddd liquor for sure

09/04/19(Tues)06:46:01 No.493084200: >>493081001 not growing who says >:)

Chapter 6 - Another letter

September 6th, 2018

Ms. María Camila Rosario Velázquez

1801 W Norris St., Philadelphia, PA 19121

Terence Monahan

Chief of Police, New York Police Department

1 Police Plaza, New York, NY 10038

Dear Ms. Velázquez,

On behalf of the entirety of the New York Police Department, I regret to inform you that your request for further inquiry by the New York Police Department into the disappearance and subsequent death of Paul Oliver Stanton has been denied. During the course of that trying investigation into Mr. Stanton's disappearance, just as with any other open missing persons case, the Police Department followed any and all standard procedures with expediency to try and ensure Mr. Stanton's safe return to his family and friends. Unfortunately as you know in this particular instance the reason for Mr. Stanton's disappearance and subsequent death were not able to be determined by the evidence available or lack thereof. The Police Department are not authorized to release any information to any person not within the victim's immediate family. Regardless, the case has been designated closed unless further evidence is presented which

denotes plausible grounds for reopening. As of yet, no such evidence has presented to the Police Department.

We understand how difficult it can be for the friends and family members of victims of death by unusual circumstances to have to grapple with the tragic reality of the situation. We empathize with everyone's desire for closure and justice, but unfortunately sometimes closure cannot be guaranteed. Please feel free to reach out if there's anything the New York Police Department can do to ameliorate any lingering questions you may have in the wake of this tragic happening.

Thank you for reaching out.

Terence Monahan

Chief of Police, New York Police Department

Chapter 7 – Day off

That single open window had become her new best friend. Ms. María Camila Rosario Velázquez sat legs crossed on the gauche red and black chevroned Bergère, her chin propped up by her right palm, it propped up by the Bergère's right armrest. No appointments today; she tended to think of these dry weekdays as her 'weekends.' Her left hand firmly gripped the handle of a porcelain bone china cup, quivering uncomfortably from the coffee's weight. She tried her best to pretend not to notice the hasty adhesive work done to refasten the handle back to its original spot; it resembled the shoddy caulking lining the corners between the walls and her ceiling. So then the window's unimpressive view became her only option at a life not weighed down by hounding realities beyond her feeble grasp, or so she pretended. In truth all one could hope to see from this vantage point was two buildings bookending the leftmost home's backyard, itself bordered on the two other sides by bowed and uneven cedar pickets mottled with discoloration, a single patch of weeds having escaped the lot's margins. A diamond tagged the leftmost section of the side of the fence facing her building, with a line jutting out from its bottom and shifting its trajectory downward at right angles; to the right of that María eyed a compact splotch of graffiti, the message of which she couldn't quite make out. The two walls seemed distrusting of one another. A few yards away, a single apple tree swayed in the afternoon breeze. Overcast skies portended something unknowable.

The interior of her meager apartment complex (and thus discounting the slight grabbag of others surrounding her own), the garbage-splayed asphalt and concrete sidewalk pavers of W. Norris St., the fence, a portion of a stranger's backyard, more fences, buildings full of people she would never meet and had never been sure if they existed or were mere fabrications of the imagination,

and that lonesome apple tree no fruit ever seemed to grow from; these components combined to form something of a micro-universe exclusively for her. A child may have called it a 'kingdom', but María was sure this micro-tableaux would buckle to such lofty criteria, especially with weather like this where even the lightest drizzle could any second now gently dapple her window just enough to obscure her view of more than half of this universe, explored and plundered no more succinctly than María from her comfortable-enough Bergère. She carefully lifted the slightly discombobulated mug to her lips and took a sip of the coffee inside, her second in minutes. Bitter; she had refused to pocket artificial sweetener packets from the table at Bernie's a few days ago, a textbook Mrs. Velázquez easy-living tactic the merits of which Ms. Velázquez was beginning to comprehend, much to her daughterly chagrin. She took swigs of her coffee during downtime such as this at near-particularly regular intervals to subconsciously counterbalance the monotony of this myopia. She wasn't so much noticing the granular minutia of each and every nook and cranny of this insulated shaft of space as much as it was all just sort of funneled into her purview whether she asked for it or not. This inward fixation with outward nothingness made her happy enough; it had a way of averting her gaze from sinful temptations. Third sip; she was getting used to it all. A Hispanic in overalls sauntered in to this micro-ecosystem stage right and began pouring gasoline from a crimson container at the base of two of the fence's pickets. Continuing to pour, he formed a trail from the horizontal fence along the sidewalk, ending at the underbelly of the station wagon he had pulled up in while María had been busy not noticing. It was likely that droplets of the lighter fluid had been splashed on his bare feet and jean fabric, she thought out of courtesy. Fourth sip; she felt her phone vibrate, despite the baggy slack of her sweatpants. She pulled it out; Alex, a childhood friend, had

dropped a link in her and María's sister Kiara's private Discord server to a new K-pop video, so recent that it had only amassed a couple thousand views at the point at which had Alex dropped it in. María would watch it later. She was too busy enjoying the view.

Fifth sip. Something about the aroma, the warmth of the cup (she preferred when not lifting it for a sip to grasp the bone china by its base), the way the aftertaste was pungent enough to make itself noticeable so she could glean some flavor from each gulp while also not being so sweet and tasteful that a sip would be subtractive in some way from her surrounding aesthetics. She worried she may get *too* used to it, such that actually *good* coffee like that Cuban place a few blocks down would shift in her life from being one of the best things in her life at the moment to being a bit *too* much for her to handle. The Spanish trap music bursting from the blown-out speakers in the station wagon with the man inside puffing his last Partagas clipped, soundtracking her catatonic stare at or around the swaying apple tree with a mixture of boom-bap musicality and white noise buzzing. Sixth sip. She liked the rhythmic vibrations and nodded her head to whatever beat she was capable of making out from them. Impulses came like that. She tried her best to stay with the moment and not check her email for prospective client outreach. There'd be a time for that later. A white woman in the leftmost building across W. Norris Street with the gasoline and H₂O-soaked fence threw open her window, pointing and shouting obscenities at the pendejo with his damned "ethnic" playlist she'd always hated having to listen to. Overalls just sat and stared forward contently, taking one final puff before dropping the Partagas, the last in his pack from the car window down to a puddle below. The particular wall she'd been staring intently at for the better part of an hour seemed to look different. It's sort of like that sensation when you think too much about the way a word is spelt; it starts to look just *wrong*, and you

expunge it from the lexicon accordingly. Blaring klaxons provided the final piece of this cinematic puzzle. The way a moment can snap it all in place, like: eureka! That lovely tree, those gorgeous overcast clouds, especially that one particular nimbus which looked just so; the distant sirens' Doppler effect, her straining shrills, his relieved smirk, and good lord this coffee's got a kick, ain't it? Finally getting some rain around here! They needed it.

Chapter 8 - Ted

1:47 P.M. Hello Mr. Thompson! My name is María Velázquez. But you can call me anything you feel most comfortable with. We had scheduled an appointment for just about now when you responded to my email last Thursday. I hope this is still a good time for you!

1:48 P.M. Yooooooo! Anything eh? ;:)))

1:48 P.M. Ahahahaha

1:51 P.M. Haha, yes, Mr. Thompson. I'd really like to thank you for being the first to try out this experimental new approach to long-distance treatment. I'm sure spending your hard-earned money on something so unconventional might seem risky, so I really appreciate you taking a chance with me here! Your feedback will be invaluable to me and my process.

1:52 P.M. You can call me teddy if u want, or just Ted for short. Hit me with whatever u got lol

1:54 P.M. Fantastic, Ted! First off, I'd like to know where you were and what you were doing when you first got the call asking you to join the very first research expedition to the Island.

1:54 P.M. I prefer to call it ganja heights cuz it's a trip yooo!!!! I was at home watching it on tv actually lol

1:57 P.M. Very funny, Ted. :) What exactly were you watching if I might ask?

1:58 P.M. Lol family guy on adult swim, the one where Peter fights the chicken idk if uve seen it?

2:00 P.M. I'm afraid I don't watch much entertainment television these days so I'm not familiar.

:(

2:01 P.M. Oh lol it's a good one. Yah anyway I was sitting there and I had some mocha ice cream which is my fav and my phone started too buzz since it's always on vibrate. That's

basically when somebody I think from the govt told me that they were manning an exp to the island and they wanted me based on my past military experience.

2:06 P.M. I see! And what if you'd be comfortable sharing does that past experience specifically consist of?

2:06 P.M. I was a chef lol

2:10 P.M. Ah. I'm sure you were able to gather a lot of useful information to be able to bring back home with you.

2:11 P.M. yEAH I GUESS LOL ANYWAY I GUESS IF ELT LIKE I DIDN'T MUCH OF ANYTHING GOING ON SO I WENT

2:11 P.M. Oops sorry no edit button -_-

2:13 P.M. That's quite alright, Ted. :) And how would you characterize your mood leading up to the expedition?

2:14 P.M. Uh well it only happened a few days later so I guess I didn't feel like I had much time to prepare honestly that made me more nervous than anything cuz in the military I always had time 2 prepare for anything which made me feel like this was gonna be bad I wasn't nervous aboutt he island so much cuz who cares it's just a dumb island I thought lol how bad could it really be ya kno????

2:18 P.M. Yes, I can see why at the time one wouldn't think much of the island aside from the bizarre circumstances surrounding its appearance. I know I hadn't taken much mind to it myself :). Would you say you felt ready for the expedition even in spite of the short lead-in time?

2:20 P.M. Yah lol I forgot to pack underwear actually,,,so that was bad lol. But I brought granola bars which a bunch of people were happy about because even tho the trip was only a few hours

by boat we all got really hungry and wanted to eat. I think some people wanted to nervous eat but I wasn't nervous like I said lol, more just hungry. But I only got to eat one and some other people got as many as 3 :(((it's ok I like to be nice and give things away lol

2:26 P.M. Well that was a very thoughtful gesture for you to perform on behalf of your fellow crewmates! So other people were nervous on the trip in, you would say?

2:27 P.M. Oh yeah this one lady was talking to herself which I thought was weird becuz I only do it when I'm at home alone nd not when I'm out with a bunch of strangers lmfao I mean who does that ya know

2:30 P.M. Maybe for her it's a way of coping with nervousness. Do you by chance happen to remember who it was that you noticed was talking to herself?

2:46 P.M. Are you still there, Ted?

2:48 P.M. Oh sorry I was using the bathroom lol. Nah I only remember that she was black and kinda hot lol

2:51 P.M. I see, well that does narrow it down for me at least! If I may I'd like to ask now specifically about your experience on the island. Tell me everything you can remember seeing, if you can.

2:56 P.M. Have u ever seen the shining?

2:58 P.M. No, I'm afraid I haven't seen that movie.

2:59 P.M. Well it was a lot like the part at the end where Jack Nicholson is chasing Danny through the maze they have out in front of their house. Except it was walls instead of leaves.

3:02 P.M. I see. Would you be able to elaborate any further?

3:05 P.M. Uhhhhh well I was walking around kinda fast. I wasn't being chased tho but I think it feels good to walk fast sometimes so I did that since noone was around

3:07 P.M. Was there anything particular about this place that stood out to you? Did you notice anything that reminded you of something from back home, your childhood, your family or friends?

3:10 P.M. No it was just walls like I said. No doors or anything like that. I kept looking for a door so that I could leave and go somewhere else but I couldn't find anything. So sometimes I'd just walk forward through a really boring white hallway. One thing tho is that I couldn't hear my footsteps even tho I had boots on and the floor felt solid like at walmart

3:13 P.M. What could you hear, Ted?

3:15 P.M. Uh now that I think about it I couldn't really hear anything. I think that's what made me most scared. I felt like when I would wear headphones back in army while I was trying to cook so I wouldn't have to hear all the crazy stuff going on outside that made it a lot harder to cook for me. Except I didn't have anything to cook so I just walked around for a while :(

3:18 P.M. That sounds terrifying, Ted. Have you talked to anybody about this since it all happened?

3:20 P.M. Only my friends that I play online with. I don't really know anybody around town so whenever I talk it's usually just to my friends online. I tried calling mom a couple times but her phone is really old so she can't answer it most of the time

3:22 P.M. I see. Well that's what I'm here for after all, Ted :)

3:24 P.M. Yah lol I guess

3:26 P.M. So please, continue if you will. How long would you say that you walked for?

3:29 P.M. Well I just kept walking. Sometimes I would have to turn left and sometime sI would have to turn right. But I never had to choose so that was good. I'd say I probably walked for about three hours at most. I thought it was weird that I would never get tired from walking. I kept thinking I would if I just walked some more but it never happened.

3:31 P.M. And did you ever find anything?

3:33 P.M. No I never found anything. I turned a corner and just started to feel like the path was never ending, like I'd never make it out and I started to get really lonely and sad. I wasn't scared anymore, just sad really. So I turned around. And as soon as I turned the first corner I was back at the beach just about half a mile away from where the boat hit the shore. I was standing in shallow water and ruined my boots.

3:34 P.M. Was there anyone else back at the boat already or were you the first one to make it back?

3:35 P.M. It was just me at first. I waited a really long time for the rest of the people that went in. We all went in at different spots so we could cover more ground and since it was such a small expedition.

3:37 P.M. The gvmt really wanted to cover it up I think but there were helicopters everywhere lol. I don't watch much TV but I think they were probably filming me sitting alone in the boat lol that was kinda cool....

3:38 P.M. I see. So looking back, how does the experience make you feel? Would you ever want to go back?

3:40 P.M. I guess it just made me not want to go outside so much lol I'm pretty shy so...

3:41 P.M. Well that's not such a bad way to be, really! And could you ever see yourself returning?

3:42 P.M. Idk...maybe if I knew it would be different. But it's like going to the same theme park even then lol so maybe it's be boring either way. Would you go with me lol

3:44 P.M. Well it's not open to public, Ted! So that would be impossible, I'm afraid.

3:44 P.M. Yah I guess so lol. I bet it'd be fun during halloween

3:45 P.M. Ted, thank you so much! I'm afraid we've just about run out of time for this session. I really hope you consider reaching out to schedule another appointment in the future so that we might be able to learn more about the island and you. :) Have a great rest of your day!

3:46 P.M. Yah I probly will lol thnx. What's ur favorite song btw I bet I can sing it really good lol

Chapter 9 - Danielle's Second Visit

At this point, Ms. Danielle Gray had become accustomed to a life post-visit. This was because she had resigned herself to feeling that nothing had changed since the first time she'd lied about what she'd seen on the Island, that she was unaffected by it all because as a hard-working, responsible person in her late 20's who should be driven, straight-laced, organized, and fearless that she alone should bear the weight of her world's troubles, so heavy were they that a feather's graze might topple this ramshackle scaffolding; because every touch were like a bullet ricocheted and unpredictable, she noted from an objective distance. It was important to her because it was important to everyone she knew that she listen and mediate upon the woes of others. She really enjoyed it. There was so much she felt she would be able to glean from all the heartache, the ennui, the stress, the grief, the familial despotism, the bills, oh the bills, the fear of the dark, Donny's left shoe has holes and he needs a new pair anyway so you might as well pick them up on your way back so leave a little early if you could, Dani do you have a twenty to spare? I swear I'll pay you back, this is the third hurricane this year!, the tears, the knife that cuts deep whenever I look in her eyes because I can tell hers glance around my head to look and Danielle I don't know what to fucking do, are you listening to me? Danielle, I've been talking to this guy and, I mean I don't know if it's going to work out because he's been acting kinda weird but maybe it will? What was your impression of him, Dani? the long waits between text message replies, my wedding photo is SHOCKINGLY bad; like, who looks at this and goes: Yes, the lighting and composition in this one is just fucking ACES for this rate, I should be charging more!....does it look that bad, Dani? Maybe we can salvage it, the way she just. Doesn't. Fucking. Notice that I care and I do not understand what I'm doing wrong because I don't know

any better way than to show her that I care than to show up at all the functions and help out at all the events and always make sure that I reply to her texts just quick enough so that she doesn't get a false impression that I put other nagging priorities ahead of her. Danielle Gray fielded these myriad anecdotes and impassioned pleas for sympathy because from her nodding and caring perspective every little story waxed off the dirt and the grime surrounding the tiny apertures mottled about the glistening plate of armor she's wont to wear in times like this, like all the time, miniscule perforations which if her diligence subsided for even a tenth of a second could allow these openings to stay unsealed just long enough that the verbal armaments from another uncaring and unsympathetic stranger would opportunistically open fire. Sometimes she'd even let that hole fester just long enough so that she might feel something for a second, but this too, deceptively was a calculated move by the cunning Ms. Danielle Gray who always knew best: nothing can get you sick twice. Or so she'd been told since childhood.

“You're looking well, Danielle.”

Things were starting to look up these days. On a cool day she'd see everybody smiling and her coffee in the festive autumn paper cup would taste just so after her morning run she powered through five days a week, three laps around that one lake just a few blocks down where old people hang around: plus she might as well run there from her house as warm-up. Her days were each carefully coordinated affairs designed so as to keep Danielle consistently operating at optimal conditions in such a way that she were constantly maximizing her productivity both at work and in what she thought of as the 'emotional spaces' society found a way of forcing her back in as something of a good samaritan's tax. She always ordered an extra large coffee; both Danielle and the coffee shop's revolving workforce had silently agreed with a smile and a

backroom handshake that this was because she couldn't well pronounce the Italian on-brand name for that size of coffee so she'd constructed and memorized an architectural framework based on vague pleasantries devoid of any social substance because she needed that coffee more than anybody had ever needed anything ever; plus taking the time to memorize the pronunciation didn't quite fit into her schedule. This coffee was every day a particular cup of coffee. It may have been the same exact volume of liquid as the cup she drank the weekday prior for all she knew. Every sip of this coffee was a forward lurch up the side of a rocky mountain, and when she emptied it she was finally back on her feet at the mountain's peak and now truly more than ever ready to start her day off right. She'd saunter up and over rolling hills. She'd steer herself thru forests thirty-thousand feet above the earth's crest, methodically ducking her head to dodge wayward branches which threatened to colonize the path her routine required to stay well-trodden. She'd pass the oasis because there just wasn't the time and maybe tomorrow she'd get up early and skip her coffee to lather in the hot springs. Then she'd arrive at the same destination as every weekday prior, and then she'd barely have time to say hello to anyone because she'd dig her heels in and grit her teeth as every little request and work order and diatribe and soliloquy and mourning at the loss of happiness and backhanded threat and gaslighting 'compliment' would each push her back a foot or two until she'd blindly fumble her way backwards through the forest. She'd roll with the stoic hills, then fall back down the mountain which was okay today because the water below never looked so deep and so blue as on that specific day, and next time she wouldn't let them push her backwards, next time she'd stand her ground and stay up there with the rest who she thought must never leave that mountain. And every day she'd forget that she never learned to swim, and maybe this weekend she'd finally get

around to scheduling the some lessons for the weekend after this coming one. And that kept her going, and so things were looking up on these days.

“I only came here today because I got a reminder on my phone that our appointment was today. So here I am.”

Things were looking up because Ms. Danielle Gray with the bachelor’s degree in biology and the half-finished Ph.D which everyone agreed she’d get back to eventually after she’d had time to sort some things out had finally built up the strength to carry the weight of not just the world but all the known universe. So strong was she that she never truly resented any pushback she saw during her day to day because she was no longer capable of feeling pain by this world. Nothing and especially no person could truly hurt her. But the Island was not a thing and it was not a person. It saw no storm that Danielle Gray had ever weathered, and Marcus was no longer there to help her navigate these uncharted places. She wouldn’t bother trying on her own. So on Fridays she’d drown; luckily she’d grown two heads, one drifting weakly just below the sea’s crest and in-between consciousnesses toward the foot of the craggy mountainside, the other entangled in the Island’s mangrove snaggle, catatonic but breathing. She could see through one or the other but never both, and so on weekends she’d be forced to stay on the island reliving that horrifying visit in technicolor over and over, crushing and rebuilding and crushing again a part of her she never knew existed. And every time the mountain’s escape seemed closer than the last, yet stuck she remained.

“I see. Well, I’ll have to charge you for scheduling. I hope you’ll understand. Send me an email if you’d like to permanently cancel. I trust you still have it.” María hadn’t managed to learn much of anything about Danielle and didn’t really feel all the worse for it. Danielle smiled,

nodded and exited through the door she'd neglected to close on her way in. A mile into her commute she realized she'd left her coffee on the mirror stand next to María's front door. She stopped and bought a bottle of water. María took a few sips and threw it away; way too much junk in there for her tastes.

Chapter 10 - A Drink

Testimony to an indifferent U.N. from a second group of carefully pre-ordained visitors to the Island had shifted the conversation. The Island had become something else entirely. Having been recently opened up to the public en masse for the measly cost of \$199, the Island was by January of 2019 less a place of arboreal mystique, less a place to contemplate in zen-like meditation and awe than it was a feverishly sought-after commodity. It was the hot new consumer product which nobody could get their hands on, with trips being offered to bespoke individuals via a lottery system. Such a structure was doomed to with Black Friday-esque violent tendencies in all who dared attempt to swim, boat, or fly their way in. The military were not having it, and people were killed. Laws had been broken by all, and so the laws were changed for some. This was experience in the age of content consumption, yet only a handful had been sent the link.

Business had slowed to a crawl; it turns out you can only milk so much revenue out of a slight group of three people chosen at random to be the first people to visit a island surrounded by an unnatural patch of mangroves before something has to give. So María Camila Rosario Velázquez and Rodrigo Velázquez (unrelated)—owner of a dive bar aptly titled ‘Rodrigo’s’ in Philadelphia, struggling due to the McDonald’s on N. Broad St. recently adding \$3 IPA’s to their menu—had come to an agreement. She’d be able to post flyers for BUSINESS_NAME_HERE and stump for the business at Rodrigo’s customer base, passing out business cards and retelling over and over a fake account of her visit to the Island; she just so happened to closely resemble a woman who went on the eighth public visitation and could easily pass off as any number of Latina women to predominantly male Caucasian barcrawlers who’d been suitably liquored up in the dim light. The more people who visited the Island, the larger a potential clientele base she would be able to

leverage for exponential business growth. She knew to leverage her femininity in subtle ways which would easily fool desperate mid-20 something year old's with far too much disposable income for their own good into thinking they might have a chance of sleeping with her were they to embark upon a ludicrous trail of scenarios which included paying to visit an Island notorious for provoking experiences so profound that many walked away proselytizing its life-changing properties and then paying her for an hour's worth of time with which to reflect upon said experience. They tended to think that they might be able to sneak in a date request in the extremely slight interval of time which exists following the formal conclusion of the hour during which one would walk from the exact spot at which the session occurs to where the exit door is located. To such typically sexually frustrated men types, these seconds or what seemed like microseconds of time were so rare and narrow that they must not only be treasured but stringently rehearsed for so as to maximize the potential that María may agree to just this once break the social contract between consummate professional and potentially recurring client all for a quick fuck.

In exchange, three times a week when she wasn't busy seeing clients or stumping for the business at the bar—regaling potential clients with slightly exaggerated tales of post-therapy mental health improvements and career success—María would visit other bars within the city of Philadelphia at night to covertly make them seem far worse. Nothing illegal per se, more just rude; she had purchased stink bombs off the Internet and had practiced clandestinely planting them at public parks before graduating to her intended target of any bar that wasn't called 'Rodrigo's'. She'd become so adept at this unusual skill that tracking down the stench's source on the part of a given bar's employee base would be nigh impossible without paying to call in a

professional. She'd then pretend to other bargoers that she usually was wont to spend her hard-earned cash at Rodrigo's where such hygienic nonsense never occurred, thus migrating people in droves toward Rodrigo's bar where she could seal the deal for her own business. Rodrigo, devout Christian, felt that it would be better if he stayed in the dark on how she'd managed to pull this off again and again.

The damage was done and María's elaborate, semi-recursive cycle had actually worked somehow. Reputations of several good haunts had been summarily shattered by the handiwork of a single woman who it seemed might do anything to garner up attention for her own line of work. No matter its notoriety, a single bad visit to a place was more than enough to get butts out of seats. She'd singlehandedly welled up a massive migration away from Monk's, Graffiti, Ray's, the Library, McGillin's, and all other manner of notable Philly spots and toward little Rodrigo's near the Badlands. Rodrigo didn't much care about the types of people who frequented his bar, as long as the money was there. He also didn't much care about the inevitable fire marshall violations this influx of newcomers would incur, nor did Rodrigo Velázquez who goes to his local Presbyterian church every Sunday have any interest in beefing up staff or security to accommodate all the new business.

María Velázquez was part of no union and had signed no contract, so all this gaslighting had earned her a net total of zero dollars, and it would be some time before the fruits of her labor would come to bear; and so she was tired and lonely and would on occasion wager to get a drink or two at Rodrigo's without any desire to be schmoozed by flaky weasel men who probably wouldn't even bother calling back the next day. And because she was a woman trying to drink alone in a crowded pub (Rodrigo preferred to call it a pub because it made him feel

old-fashioned), trying to have a drink or two outside of the crippling solitude of her lonesome apartment without constantly being bombarded by propositions from wired-out floozies (a handful of women included) was like searching for a needle in a haystack. Or rather, that was the first metaphor which came to mind for her.

“What’s your name?”

That was always how it started. It was almost impressive how incredibly myopic and daft the reservoir of ice-breakers she’d be approached with were. After noticing some recurring one-liners—“Do you come here often?”; “You order that a lot? What’s that called? That’s not on the menu, is it?”; or glib propositions to have a threesome with buzzed couples—María performed a cursory Internet search to see if her most pessimistic assumptions about the quality and preparedness of these potential suitors were all justified. Sure enough, most, if not all the results she had observed as recurring openers could be gleaned from the first handful of links queried. This didn’t so much amuse María as disturb her; what of Philadelphia’s much-touted cultural variety? Where was all that colorful originality she’d heard so much about? Drones, she thought. They were all drones of a sort. Their vague sexual inquiries lacked clarity and forethought. Surely a woman of her steadily rising stature deserved more chutzpah in an introduction than, “Hey, how ya doin’ tonight?” Rodrigo slyly observed each of her with indifference; no matter the outcome of her solitudinous rejections, her wistful suitors would still buy another drink, whether to keep the good vibes going along with her (though this never happened; it was all theoretics) or else to drink away the pain (always to drink away the pain). This wasn’t the quality of man she was looking for, the quality of man she knew was out there; the quality of man she had known before, she thought. For these to her were not men. Children.

Charlatans, imitators strapped and bolted to the lowest rung of the most primordial of ladders, all rotted bamboo and tattered string. For they were not men and knew not how to build. Was this what she had been building a business, nay, an empire for? Modern society. Oh, brother. What a joke, she thought. A bad one, at that. At this point, she was only onboard with these self-directed lonesome visits to Rodrigo's for a self-affirming laugh. She knew she was better than the rest of that pitiful lot. It didn't matter to her that they probably all thought the same thing as her.

Aggrandizement by self-immolation. And she was—by far—the best at it, if not here then in all of Philadelphia. Nay, the country. Nay, the world, she thought.

María had been so caught up in her own revolving oscillation back and forth between propping up her superior intellect and silently judging not just the Rodrigo's bachelor visitors but too the other women—taken or otherwise—that for all intents and purposes she may as well have not even been at the bar. She could have been anywhere in the world and she would have felt just as strongly about this particular subject. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania truly was a melting pot of the humanistic universe, she knew, a place where anywhere you go anything from any other place in the world could be happening at any given moment. Sociological scholars might have referred to it as a “microcosm”—she had read this word written and spoken aloud alike several times by esteemed Pulitzer-winning types, so regurgitating it inwardly to herself might in some way bring some much-needed clout to her interiority complex. It was a hole so dark, deep and seemingly vast she was careful not to venture too far in lest she never return. After all, who else would get around to pruning her inbox a couple times or maybe just once a week? I should really get on that when I get home, she reminded herself, or maybe once I wake up and have had my coffee and check the news and refresh and check the news again. María valued preparing ahead of time

these sorts of mental checklists to attempt to follow for the next day's agenda. She'd draft them up in her head based on a non-scientific assessment of how the previous day had gone, taking into account where she'd gone wrong and where else she might need to make improvements. No, sorry, I'm actually seeing someone at the moment. The key was to never do everything on the list; that way you're always leaving room for improvement and thus self-betterment for the next day's list. You know, Rodrigo, I think I'll have what he's having. Another reason not to fulfill everything that needed to be done was, well: what kind of a life is that? Spontaneity was key. Honestly, I've tried their sweet potato fries and they're...okay, but I don't know if I'd get them again, if that makes sense? People who stick to lists are as bad as people who never cease to stare at their phones, always checking it upon every buzzing notification, checking multiple times between notifications on the off-chance that maybe they'd missed one, and just checking to check if anybody had posted any interesting updates to their Twitter feed, or their Facebook feed, or their Instagram feed, or if she'd gotten a snap on Snapchat (which she hated but everyone else was there and the only thing worse than actually using Snapchat is that judgmental sneering look she'd get from her mother and sister who were ardent Snapchat users, so prickly and piercing was it that she'd rather just get onboard the Snapchat train than bite through her disdain for its sloppy, unintuitive and downright gaudy user interface than have to suffer through yet another family dinner which she was only formally a part of), or if she'd gotten a reply on a pressing email or text message, or to distract herself from the prying feeling that by having sent that message she must in some way be a bother, useless, absolutely useless and not worthy of anybody's time, a shell, nothing more than a body, and this whole business thing wasn't going to work out, she knew it but didn't want to believe it, Mom was right, what a fool I've been, a damn

fool, no, I've never liked gin and tonic but yeah I'll take a rum and Coke, sure, why not, damn it all, what a joke, a sick joke at that, why'd I fucking say that? This is bad. This is really fucking bad. I could have just hit backspace and this never would have happened. Yeah, I could eat.

You? Oh, mine? Well, I guess my favorite album is probably... (goddamn it, you fucking idiot. Get it through your skull: he's. Just. Not. That. Into you. Not as a business partner, certainly not a romantic one.) ...whatever the last one by Grizzly Bear was called. Yeah, I listened to that one a lot. What's yours? (Don't check it yet. It hasn't buzzed. That wasn't the phone, that was just your leg shifting around a bit. Do not. Check. The phone. That looks desperate. You are not desperate. You just really want to read what they have to say. It was an interesting question, after all. And interesting questions yield interesting responses, given, at least, that the person in question is interesting. And the person in question is interesting. Very interesting. Don't check for a reply. Don't check their Instagram for new posts, because they're not alive and they're no longer real. Don't check their Instagram story for new updates. Definitely don't scroll through the likes feed to check and see if they've been liking other people's posts instead of replying to your text. Don't do any of these things because there is a real live human being right in front of you who is going on about God-knows-what and that's an incredibly rude thing to do to another human being. But maybe a quick check wouldn't hurt; after all, he probably wouldn't even notice, so self-absorbed is he that his eyes never avert away from their truthfully inward fixation. Take a sip. You haven't taken a sip of your drink in a handful of minutes, and that's weird. The phone is on the counter; you'll notice it when it lights up. Hell, you'll probably even feel the reverberation through the mahogany countertop in your hand which is placed naturally and definitely not in an awkward premeditated position in such a way which will efficiently

minimize the gap of time between noticing a notification has been received and responding to not even the message but just the notification alone, because the goal here is to be alone in a space outside of the comfort of your apartment so as to maximize presentness and so as to recenter yourself after a hectic work week of receiving and responding to critical work emails. So take a sip, because it'll take the edge off and you deserve this. Oh, I've not heard that one yet, but I think I read about it somewhere online. Some music blog or something, not that I frequent those much these days. Just followed a link there. Buzz. Oh God. Oh God, no. Don't look. Do not. Look. At the text. The text? Surely it's *the* text. He probably noticed it. And he's probably patiently measuring a broad estimate of the amount of time I wait before checking the phone even though we're presently engaged in riveting conversation about the arts and culture at large as thoughtful and *present* adults are wont to be. Is it possible he noticed the way my eyes glanced over for the most split of seconds to try and gauge what specifically the notification is? Probably. Likely, even. Who am I kidding? It's probable. He noticed me looking over at the phone. That happened. I saw him look over at my phone after it dinged and lit up just after I did it. But I did it quicker because I was waiting for it. That's why she tried to look first; she was testing him. And what she had been able to glean from this is that this particular gentleman is no gentleman at all; he's a nosy, prodding, bastardish type. She hadn't noticed the pill he'd spiked her rum and Coke with when Ms. María Camila Rosario Velázquez, who often summarized the entirety of her career of choice as the ability to listen deeper than others would emotionally consider themselves capable of, had been staring blankly forward behind the counter in a frozen panic about something that she knew wasn't really all that important to begin with; thank God he was new to this terrible, terrible thing he was planning to do her. She hadn't noticed that the notification had

nothing to do with that man who regarded María Camila Rosario Velázquez in a purely platonic fashion. She hadn't noticed all his obvious tells and turns of phrase that surely would have given away his sadistic intentions had she been there enough and had she been centered enough. She hadn't noticed all the uncomfortable looks other people had been giving him prior to him waltzing right up beside her so that he might have his cruel, cruel way with her. She hadn't noticed a couple attempt to swat away his seedy gropes and report his unscrupulous behavior to the sole underpaid and overworked bartender who had been too busy juggling the entirety of the unreasonably crowded customer base to notice María Camila Rosario Velázquez passed out on his mahogany countertop. Devout Presbyterian Rodrigo Velázquez noticed but allowed himself not to see. How plainly irresponsible, she thought, that she hadn't noticed anything, and for the rest of her life she would spend hours each day inside of herself, in front of and away from others, wondering why.

Chapter 11 - Estate Manager

To a Ms. María Camila Rosario Velázquez:

I hope this letter finds you well. My name is Diana Lafonte and I have been the Munch family's estate manager for about nine years now. I am writing to you in deep mourning on the behalf of Mr. Christian Munch, who sadly passed away six weeks ago. Myself and Mr. Munch's surviving family members have been surprised and humbled by the amount of letters you have sent to Christian from before and after he passed. Please forgive the estate for the languid speed which we have taken to reply to your inquiries. As you might imagine, we have all been shocked and extraordinarily busy in making the proper arrangements made necessary by this tragedy.

Christian was a smart if troubled young man. He could at one second be having the time of his life, but if one were to so much as look at him wrong he might totally flip on you. This was just his nature. Everyone who knew him knew that he was loving but also knew to tread carefully.

This could lead to...difficulties at points. Ever since his father passed away, he's had trouble.

You may not have known this, but his mother and father separated when he was very young. All these difficulties seemed to pile up on him. Personally, and I can't speak for the rest of the family, but I think this is why he chose to go to that island. Perhaps he felt he had nothing left to lose. He thought maybe he'd learn something, something about why his marriage went wrong.

He was a man who lived inside his head and microanalyzed every single interaction he ever had with anyone. He would never admit to something like this, but you could tell every time he'd have a conversation with somebody else.

I saw him a lot, probably more than anyone else in the family (if you could consider me as "part of the family," so to speak).. I was asked by his uncle to check up on him frequently after his

father died and his marriage fell apart. He was cheerful as ever, but I could tell it was all a facade. His demeanor around others was something he would put on to avoid having to engage with others in how he was really feeling inside. This was his defense mechanism. I know this because he wrote a letter addressed to you, which we found hidden beneath some books in a drawer in his bedroom at his house. He lived alone, and so nobody was around to stop him when he killed himself. His wife had stopped answering his phone calls, and we had received word that she had perhaps filed for a formal divorce as well as a restraining order against him after he tried to break into her house in the middle of the night.

I think Christian felt that he had nobody else he could turn to except for you. I wish he knew that I cared for him, that I noticed that he was hurting. I wish I'd done more to help. The letter he wrote to you is included in this envelope. I'm sorry to say that I selfishly read it. I wanted to confirm that I was right about how he was feeling. It made me feel observant, important even. I saw him the day after his appointment with you. He seemed...changed. And honestly, I'm not sure it was for the better, given how things have turned out. I hope you and your business see all the success in the world in your future.

Signed,

Ms. Diana Lafonte

Estate Manager, Munch Family

Chapter 12 - Visit to the Park

In the distance, María spotted two children from different families taking turns strutting across monkey bars. Neither of the two were very good at it, but then again they were very young; she wondered how the steel beams must have felt to the touch on a chilly Sunday morning in January such as this. All the pigeons, doves and geese were strutting their stuff in a cutesy performance in the greens of Washington Square, fighting over scraps of bread catapulted their way by lovestruck couples and naive toddlers. These endeavoring birds would swap in and out of shifts and take baths and water breaks in the central fountain. On a nearby bench advertising men's rights law advocacy, two women in matching parkas hold hands and exchange kisses. María clenched her slowly cooling cappuccino in a styrofoam cup in two hands by a cardboard grip, fingers interlaced. She took a sip, crossed her legs, right over left, and resumed people-watching. María found the ambient faux-natural sound from the fountain's unceasing jets soothing. Waters have a way of quelling, she thought, no matter the time or temperature. Water is life. The pigeons and the doves and the goose knew it too. Nature's prime export, yet some could not have it. These were the disquieting thoughts María was prone to feeling whenever she'd find herself in a public place by her lonesome. It was an introversion spurred on by a specific sort of loneliness she couldn't find at Rodrigo's nor nearby the window overlooking neighboring apartment complexes, an inwardness wherein people-watching wasn't only accepted but advocated for by the arcane and nebulous social contracts guiding every single minute interaction between every single individual who'd signed it, whether they'd picked up the pen or not. But only at a distance; that's why they invented benches, after all. That's why they invented coffee stands and coffee shops and why people flocked to those sorts of things. That's what they invented public

parks. In the sprawling city of Philadelphia, where one could turn a corner and watch kids play basketball out of one corner and catch a drug deal out of the other, where one might just narrowly miss a collision with a young cyclist if they weren't careful, where you walk just down the block to grab a gyro or two, and then you could keep walking forever and never get anywhere, where along the way you see everybody you always see on that route yet never meet anybody, it's just something you do. If you weren't taking the time out of your week (and we're all busy here so no excuses, young lady); well, that's just kinda weird, isn't it?

María visited the park maybe twice a month, if that. At this point, she'd stopped getting all gussied up for these trips in some forced attempt to try and look properly cultured, like a true city's woman. These days she'd just as well regardless of the weather throw on some flip flops, some sweats, maybe a tracksuit if she were feeling fancy, a tank top or t-shirt and make an hour of it. This was her hour, after all, and it should be spent accordingly, she thought. Washington Square seemed to be the only place she truly felt as if she could decompress from all the troubles of her life and the world writ large. Life was changing at the speed of now and forever, and María had perhaps unwisely chosen to tether her professional life to the latest cultural zeitgeist. Out of her peripheral vision, she could spot a young girl not much older than six "mangroving," the latest dance popular with children wherein the dancer stands in a body of water, cups their hands, places their arms to their sides, and sways their hips with a certain swagger and confident demeanor in such a way to resemble a mangrove growing from the Atlantic Ocean; a fun variation on the dance would see participants feigning weight gain to simulate the as-yet unconfirmed yet very possibly true rumor that the Island was growing outward from its original position. She saw trendy t-shirts (she was getting ideas), social media influencers livestreaming

their opinions and interviewing others (her process was *far* more professional and well-rehearsed in delivery), religious preachers (annoying), and the like.

María had observed that people all had different names for the Island. In the months since the place had appeared she'd heard "Mangrove Mangle", "The New Atlantic", "Bramble of Dreams", "Isle of Dreams", "Dream Island", "Dreamland", "Premonition Alley", "Fucking Horseshit", and the like. But assigning names with a degree of specificity to the Island seemed to María to miss the point entirely. How could one deign to coin a title for a place which seemingly could conjure up premonitions which span the entirety of human existence and experience and even beyond? The sheer variety of stories María had been beleaguered with by a wanton assortment of people, some troubled, some rich, some poor, some upstanding, some not, was overwhelming. Ludicrous, even. So she knew that her vague, more inclusive and all-encompassing title of simply, "The Island" was far more appropriate a moniker. If only others could know how right she knew she was.

María felt three light vibrations from her right shorts pocket, which meant the email app, which meant a potential client reaching out. Two teenagers with fake lightsabers are fighting on a concrete platform, one clearly with the upper hand over the other.

Chapter 13 - Aasthika Saha

“Aasthika Saha. ”

“And where are you from, Mrs. Saha?”

“I was born in Bogra out in Bangladesh. My parents emigrated with me to live with relatives in Boston. I’ve lived there ever since.”

“And you’re 42 now?”

“That’s correct.”

It was March of 2019 and the world was a new place. Things had changed, especially for María Camila Rosario Velázquez. She’d taken what she perceived as a much-needed vacation throughout the entirety of the month of February. February, the shortest month of the year, seemed like it was going to be the longest month of her life. So, she took a break. Unpaid, of course; she was, after all, a self-employed woman. The vacation was a farce, of course. María was working hard through all of February. Being the only person employed at a company means having to do everything for yourself. It means sifting through potential clients’ applications; she had transitioned to a more formal application process for clients looking to book an appointment with her, that way she could leverage enough information to perform a thorough search of their online output on a variety of social media platforms and anywhere else Google might lead her. But her straining Achilles’ Heel for the month of February was in working with an outside advertising agency called, “Mads’ Ads!” (exclamation included for emphasis)—brainstorming, providing them with visual assets, arguing; basically doing their job for them. Mads’ Ads were utter incompetents, missing deliverable deadlines and being generally uncommunicative toward María. Mads’ Ads were becoming a constant stress point for María; she found herself spending

her ostensible vacation time obsessively checking her phone for text or email communications, then checking her computer to see if an email notification may have missed her phone, then checking each of her several alternate inboxes she had provided the team on the off-chance that they would mistakenly choose to try and communicate with her through those channels; she didn't have any pride in having to write, 'animangafn101@hotmail.com' within professional correspondences, but she also wasn't so dignified that she would neglect to provide the option.

“How did you first hear about the Island?”

“I mean, it's kind of impossible to escape it. That thing really is everywhere. I see t-shirts about it all the time. People are obsessed with it, which is understandable. It's very strange. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. It's like a science fiction novel in a way. But I guess if I had to pick, it was probably on the news? Like, a tweet with a link to a news website, I mean. I don't really watch the news much these days. That would be how I learned about the Island, I guess.”

“And how did you visit?”

Being an island (hard categorization still disputed), one can't just mosey on over of their own volition whenever they so please. You have to either fly or take a boat. The UN's General Assembly in a 173-20 shutout voted to erect a helipad adjacent to a concrete loading wharf in order to accommodate (paying) visitors. A small business might take you there on a meditative 'scenic route' experience by dingy or canoe; the giants of industry were wont to provide a variety of options in terms of tiers, from VIP suites aboard cruise liners by Disney and Carnival to elaborate three-course meals from thousands of feet in the air, first class and then strapped to a licensed skydiver to jump out of a plane, all the way down to a life-in-the-fast-lane speedboat

with shirtless bikini-clad women for jocky midlife crisis types who seized every opportunity they could to regale stories of their four months as captain of their high school football team.

“I took a helicopter with a family who had brought their kids. I kind of felt like a third wheel.”

The pathway one takes once they arrive on the Island now resembled the entryway to an amusement park or an arena concert. Lines. Lines to get into other lines. Ticket scabs profiting off of the ignorance of those who paid for the trip to the Island but didn't know that they would need a ticket to get in, and who would deliberately attempt to deceive people from buying a ticket at the box office so they could offer a more expensive version which may or may not be accepted as a legitimate entry method. Snack vendors, food trucks, and even a restaurant for those who couldn't afford one of the top travel packages which included meals but by the time they would reach the Island realized that they'd need to eat something, because who knows how long they'll be in there for? You had people selling t-shirts, pins, stickers, toys, all sorts of cheap plastic gadgets, any and all sorts of accoutrements, garlands, lanyards, gatekeeping regalia to let others know that hey man, *I was there*, colorful, fun bunting for millennials who had just signed apartment leases and hadn't yet grown out of the Christmas lights decoration phase, Fabergé eggs with decorative mangrove curlicues, foliage donated from the world's nations, etc. The music blaring at a volume loud enough to drown out any and all second thoughts one might be having about paying for a ticket yet quiet enough to hear the inane thoughts of your precious loved ones was whatever Billboard Top 40 hits were charting at the moments. It was rumored then that some construction company had been contracted by the government (but whose? This was one of those types of conspiracy theories where people would confidently declare platitudes like, 'the government are doing it' and pray that nobody would ask, 'But whose?') to seal off the

mangrove Island with a glass geodesic dome which could be entered through a door, but for now they'd haphazardly propped up a canvas tunnel and done their best to provide for a smooth experience entering the Island proper. People were paying for it, after all.

“Ah, well hopefully it was a pleasant trip regardless.”

“Yes, it very much was. Thank you for asking.”

One of the Island's most curious properties which has confounded Pulitzer Prize-winning renowned scientists the world over is the notion that once you enter through the thick brush, regardless of whether or not you enter with another person and either are or aren't touching them, you'll find yourself losing that person. Even though you've both entered the same place and ostensibly exist within the same three-dimensional space at the same time, somehow, somehow you would end up elsewhere. This is what brought people the world over, people who loved capitalism, anti-capitalists, socialists, Arabs, Jews, Mormons, spiritualists, doctors, philosophers, white people, black people, politicians, philanthropists, communists, iconoclasts; the pithy notion that “We're all in this life together, you know what I'm sayin'?” which any right-minded individual would be remiss to not make a mockery of made itself keenly true. This place, this nonplace, or rather this unplace where one's dreams would manifest, where nightmares were wrought, premonitions of the future revealed, light shined through murky clouds, the dead raised back to life; it was something that anybody could get behind. It was a microuniverse, an arcology of experience. Contained yet visible to the naked eye from miles away and kilometres above. No unit of measurement could suitably hope to map its sprawl. Yet at this point they all knew it was growing bigger, wider, more rotund and expansive, in a physical sense of the words; ‘they’ being the people that most people agreed ought to be aware

of these sorts of things. Promulgations from all around the world and perhaps even beyond this planet arrived in swarms not merely for the Island's euphoric, revelatory capabilities. It was just what you did around that time, nature's first entry into the hashtag content era. Who knew how long such a place could hold the world's attention for? How long before its expansion might see fit to swallow whole the platforms and restaurants and entire livelihoods which sprang up around it? Nobody could be sure, and probably nobody cared. You just got in while the gettin's good, they thought, and make sure to hold on tight.

“So...whenever you're ready, miss—pardon me, Mrs. Saha, I'd love to hear about your experience on the Island.”

And prepare for liftoff!

“Right then. So when I got there, you know, I'd seen the footage but I was really surprised just how big it was. Even when you're on the outside, you basically can't get much of a sense for how sprawling this place is. Frankly, I think it's incredible. Like, totally worth the money just to stand outside the place, much less go in it. I think I bought a candy bar to tide me over. I figured we'd be back around night time and we could just pick up some take-out something or later.

Then I had to stand in a really long line. It was a Saturday afternoon so obviously lots of people were there. It was probably a two hours wait. I'm not sure why they make you wait to get in, especially when you consider that you're not supposed to be able to find anyone else when you go in. But I'm sure there's some kind of safety reason I'm not thinking of off the top of my head. So anyway, they vetted me just in case I had any weapons on-hand, which is funny since...well, I'm sure you know what they mean. They had to pat me down. I didn't like it, but of course I had to go along with it to get in. I noticed some people weren't patted down, but I'm not sure why

that is...this was all like twenty minutes before I was able to actually go inside, by the way. There's like a waiting room you have to wait around in for a while before you're able to go in. They play this strange three-minute or so safety video on TV that it didn't seem like anybody else was really watching. I felt like I should probably try to watch it just in case. They tell you not to touch anything...I doubt anybody really follows that rule. Of course you'd touch stuff! Like, what are we paying for here? So about half an hour passes by in that room, and by this point we've been kind of under the knife for about two hours. There's a lot of pressure being there. It's like when you're on vacation and you feel like you have to get the most out of your time. The little beeper they strap to your wrist was kind of uncomfortable. This lady behind glass sitting at a counter grabbed a microphone and started calling names one-by-one to go in. I was the third person, about a minute after they let somebody named Frank in, I think his name was. My husband told me later that he went in after me. So the security guard let me by and then I'm walking through this dark tunnel, and at the end I can see the mangroves with little jets of light cracking through. I almost wanted to run to the end, I was so excited! I think I was sweating a little bit, and I kinda wished they'd let us bring water inside. I thought I'd be thirsty the whole time but I was actually okay. So I trudged through the mangroves which was honestly a lot trickier than I thought it'd be. I almost tripped a couple times. You'd think this would be a smoother process with all the safety precautions in place, but then again I guess it's just part of nature, that is if you could call what's going on there nature. I walked through the mangrove into a parking garage full of cars. I was the only person in there. This is a little embarrassing to admit, but I kind of instinctively tried checking my pockets for my car keys. I'm not sure if any one of the cars was supposed to be mine. You know how in dreams you get this sense that you have a

lot of awareness about what's, like, going on? You'd just have to stop to think about it but it's hard to control what's happening in a dream without accidentally waking up. So you're too preoccupied experiencing the stuff happening in the dream right in front of you to notice yourself, and once you have noticed yourself it's too late. And everything's kind of hazy. For me, and of course, I can't speak for everyone else, but personally for me this was like, what if a dream world where everything kind of half is and half isn't, but also you're aware of all of it? Cognizance, I think is the word for that. So it's the strangest feeling, just the feeling alone of being in what is otherwise a pretty boring-looking parking garage. I was on the third floor, so I followed my first instinct and headed toward the nearest stairs. There was an elevator which I thought about taking, but I started to have second thoughts. Something about being trapped in a thing inside another thing just...creeped me out. Not that I'm claustrophobic or anything like that, but you never know what could happen. We don't really know what's up with the island, so I feel like I'm already taking chances. Like a hero or something! Ha. So I headed down the stairs, not even thinking to stop and look outside the complex to find out where I was. I think that was the dream part of me taking over, the part of you that's like very goal-oriented and just kind of uses your legs to sort of warp you to your destination. I didn't know what my destination was, but at the same time I really did know. A hospital. I was headed for a hospital. But I only know that in hindsight. I sort of...warped there. It's not that I don't remember walking there, though. I didn't walk there. It just happened. I was laying in a bed, giving birth to a child. Dominic was there, my husband, sitting right beside me, holding and smiling like he always does. But I'd never seen that particular smile before. That was a certain kind of smile I'd never seen from anybody, not just him, now that I think about it. We've never been able to have a child. We've

tried, you know, but these things just have a way of not working out. All the best things that should be easy just never are. They say children are all miracles, but this one truly was. The last time we tried...we got far into the whole process. Six months and it perished. So now I was getting to have a baby, but...I wasn't happy. This wasn't a real dream. Like...I...I know how this ends because I'm really me in there, not some fake dream version of me, it's the real me living that moment. I don't buy that thing, by the way. That all children are miracles. Because miracles only have good parts. Miracles aren't born to die. It's just nature taking its course. That's that like vacation pressure thing I mentioned before. I'm so bad about that. I'm such an easy mark. Like, micromanaging and overplanning and all that crap...I can't just live for the moment. It's all gotta be in service of something else. So I'm supposed to be living out this fantasy, with just me, my husband, and a beautiful, healthy baby girl, but instead I'm spending time just thinking: but what does this get me? Why is any of this?" Aasthika looks out Maria's window for a good minute. The two silently agree to let the moment breathe. "...Next thing I knew it was over and I was somewhere else. Still on the Island, of course. I hadn't left, oh no. I was standing in a kitchen, and it didn't look like my own. And because I was still the me that's sitting here right now, I didn't really have any sort of insight into where we were at all. I was chopping onions for some kind of stew, the type I never used to make. Something with beef and carrots, very American. I guess you'd just call that a 'beef stew.' I mean, it sure smelled good, but that's just not...the feeling was uncanny. I just remember thinking: this is somebody's life. It's not yours. You're not part of it, yet there my husband goes in the other room, drilling into a piece of wood. But my husband's not a carpenter! He couldn't fix a pipe to save his life, and I've always weirdly loved that about him. Yet there is, in the other room, just drilling away to make holes for

screws. I never saw him to do this, though, I just knew that's what he was doing. That knowledge was just as real as the stew. I could see our daughter playing on her swingset which Dominic had built for her a couple years back. She looked so free. But I couldn't call out to her because I didn't know her name. It's such a sadness. I was never granted that, or rather I never allowed myself to know it. Because some part of me knew it was all fake. I was silent and ashamed. I dumped those onions in, just bear-hugging the cutting board hoping I don't drop any specks on the floor. I figured that was more or less the next step. It already smelled good. I wanted to make sure I was making the absolute best meal for them because I knew it would be the only meal I could ever make for the three of us, not the two of us. And then it was over and I was somewhere else again. I never even got to finish it. Could you imagine that? That was when I knew this Island was a cruel place. Everyone else's stories seemed like complete fucking bullshit to me right then and there. Now I know why people revere it, like a religion. It doesn't give anything back. It just takes. And it took me to this river. Alone again, just like in the parking garage. That was the most comforting one, but also the quickest. Next, I was sitting in the passenger seat of a car. Dominic was driving, and our daughter, *my* daughter was in the backseat. She was telling us a story about school. She'd met this boy that she thought might be nice, but really he turned out to be a jerk. It made her cry. It made me cry. I bet that boy was the Island, or maybe its son. A cruel parent makes a cruel child. There's nothing worse than a child's tears. That's why children can't be miracles, because all they do is bring a mile of stress for an inch of happiness. So I'm glad we could never have a child. Maybe in some way that's the Island's way of showing us that we were actually lucky." Aasthika took a sip from her water bottle and crossed her legs the other direction. "Her crying stopped and she looked disconnected. I kept turning around to check up on

her, just to make sure she was doing okay. She just looked...gone. Just totally disconnected from the Earth. I guess that was the Island's way of showing me that that truly was my child. Ha! I make myself laugh. She was just completely zoned out. One thing I noticed...Dominic never once tried to say anything to console her. It was all me doing the heavy-lifting, which, well, what good that did. But it made me wonder something: was that my Dominic? Or was that somebody else? Who was I seeing? It looked exactly like him, just a bit older. But would my Dominic respond the same way? I think that was the biggest takeaway for me. Like, maybe the husband I had in there and the husband I've loved all these years out there were the same person, and maybe I never knew the real him until just then. It made me confused and upset. Do you know about VR? Virtual reality. They say that once you're in it, all sense of time kind of just flies away and you're just in it. Everything in the real world ceases to exist. I never had that experience with the VR demos I tried. They were all kinda cool but nothing life-changing or anything like that. But this place...we moved on. I wonder what the me that had to live those intervening years between stops was thinking all that time. Do you think she knew she wasn't real?" "It's hard to say for sure." "Or that her husband wasn't real? In like a couple ways." "Well, again..." "Sorry, I'm being ridiculous. The other stuff started coming so fast...and she was getting older. One minute we were at a mall, and she was probably twelve, it was just the two of us. We went into a jewelry store, walked out, and then I was watching Dominic hold her near the top of a waterfall. I was really that she'd slip, obviously. Then we were on an airplane, and this baby wouldn't stop crying. There was this other one...for some reason I don't remember much about it. I was reporting on...some illicit business deal or the other. And then we were at a funeral. And this was one of those...you know, where I didn't know what was going on, but

subconsciously I really did know. We were at Dominic's funeral, outside on a rainy day. Very cliché, I know. I was around the age I am now, and I'm 42 now. And Dominic is still alive. But here, he had died. And I don't know how he died. And whatever, it's fantasy, but it made me worry about him. And then I got mad that it made me worry, that we'd paid all this money just to have one more thing to have to worry about. Complete nonsense. I was holding her hand. She looked the same as in the car after she'd been done crying, only a bit older. I got the sense that we raised a quiet one. I suppose there are worse ways to go. She never argued. But then again, she didn't talk much. That's something I've thought a lot about since I left the Island: how much is the Island actually capable of? Yes, she cried, and she did talk through it, but none of that was really cogent thought. So then to what extent is the Island able to create these visions? Like, what are its limits? Think about this: everyone's stories are actually pretty similar. They're all rather sparse. Really broad strokes images, but play it back and it's like a film student's sophomore project. Just vague images. They'll make you feel something, yes, but pinching somebody will make them feel something for basically the same amount of effort. It's all just vagueness. Empty and hollow. And it's like you get a half-finished product, like you don't get enough to fully throw yourself in any one scene. You spend all this time focussed on readjusting yourself to these shifting surroundings, or just trying to find your way in. It really costs too much money. What are you supposed to get out of it? But that's why it's so fascinating to me, at the same time. It's so...just, itself, you know? And I truly think that there is something worthwhile to be gleaned from that." She looks down. "I think I'll take that coffee now, if you don't mind."

“Oh yes, of course.” María stood up and shifted over to the coffee maker, at once attempting to look composed while also processing all this information that Aasthika seemed to have loaded in the chamber while also having to focus on the normally daft steps required to make a decent cup. “That was the last part. I never said goodbye in there, not to her, not to him, certainly not to any of the other people who were there, all dressed up in their nicest black. I didn’t recognize them. I saw his body, and that probably enough. The beeper went off, which reminded me that I’m me and I had to leave. So I just did what seemed natural at that time. I let go of her hand, and headed in the direction opposite to where I was standing. I waded through crowds of people who all looked disturbed, mortified that I would leave my own husband’s wedding. I guess I could have stayed. I mean, how would they stop me? But that sort of scared me, and none of those people would be able to understand that. When I got out, I was back in the waiting room from before. Just grabbed my things and left. Dominic was already back waiting for me. He figured I must have been in there around two or three hours judging off how long his trip lasted. I just sort of agreed. It was strange, he seemed in good spirits. We had both agreed beforehand not to share with each other what our experiences were like, and so far we’ve honored that. But I kind of want to tell him. Is it wrong that I feel bad that he had a better time than I did?” “I wouldn’t say so.” “Right. I mean, I’m only happy for him in so much as you’re supposed to be happy when your spouse is happy. That’s just part of how a relationship stays afloat. I guess other than that, things are okay.”

María was having trouble coming up with a polite way of asking Aasthika if she was finished telling her story. You’d think she’d have some sort of a script for these sorts of things by now, but perhaps that was all a part of her charm and authenticity.

“Could you see yourself ever going back?”

“Sometimes I think about it. Stories by people who’ve done repeat visits have kind of fascinated me a bit. The gamble for me is, I can’t help but wonder, like, what’s next in that story? How do I fare as a widow? As a widowed mother too? Do I date someone else? And what does she think about it? If she talks at all, which she probably wouldn’t. But then again, what if? And that’s the problem, is that who’s to say I’ll even see that stuff on the second visit, or even the third, fourth, or fifth? This stuff is just so weird and confusing. That’s basically my verdict on the whole thing.”

Aasthika downs the whole cup of coffee in two swigs without so much as a wince. She pulls out a business card from her left jean pocket and shoves it confidently into María’s hand while getting up out from her seat. María stares at it blankly out of surprise, not quite sure in the moment what’s being offered to her.

“I’m actually a journalist. I’m sure you already knew that.”

María just looks up at her, a bit confused. She wondered if Aasthika’s work gets published under a different or longer version of the name she knows her by, since a cursory Google search hadn’t yielded anything to indicate to her that she’d been meeting a journalist.

“Don’t worry, this wasn’t an interview. I just really enjoyed this is all. I think it’s nice and smart what you’re doing here. But if you ever did want a profile done on you...my info’s all there.” She smiles and heads for María’s front door.

“Er...wait!” A lump in María’s throat is telling her to speak up for once.

“Could I ask you something?”

“Um, sure, what is it?” María could tell that Aasthika thought the outburst was a bit unusual, yet couldn’t quell her perturbed demeanor.

“How did you hear about me?”

Aasthika stopped and sized up the room, stalling for time to rack her brain.

“Hmm...I saw your ad on a billboard a couple of days ago. I think we were somewhere in Connecticut. We’re actually on vacation. Dominic thinks I’m visiting a friend. He’s back at the hotel.”

María nods once and stares ahead nervously.

“I see.”

“It’s a nice picture of you! Hope to see it again,” she declared awkwardly.

Aasthika about-faces for the door. “Er...thank you!” is all María manages before Aasthika is swiftly out the door. Her first client in ages, here and then gone just as quickly. María Velázquez removed her spectacles from her face. They didn’t really help her see; they were as a lampshade, subconsciously devised to disguise her childlike fascination. Though if anything, they only served to bolster the dreamlike nature of her clients’ stories. Still, on or off, it didn’t much matter. María’s life was petering on the brink of something else entirely; she just couldn’t quite see that from her window. She typed in Aasthika’s email address into her contacts and hit save. The room got lighter and her coffee stayed warm.

Chapter 14 - Breakfast at Bernie's

“¿Me estás escuchando, hija?”

[DEADHEDRED37] you eatin that?

“Hmm?”

“You're not even listening to me. Children. Miserable. Idiota.”

“Eating what?”

“Did you even hear what I said?”

[DEADHEDRED37] hash browns. I want them if ur not

[shesellsbeesgills] fuck ahaha

“What's your plan? Next steps, hija! What's going on now?”

WHAT'S GOIN' ON? AYYYYY WHAT'S GOIN ON? TELL ME WHAT'S GOIN ON?

[afxfn4.82454201] what's up?

[DEADHEDRED37] ayyy

“Waiting on clients. I ran some ads in a few different states. Now I'm just waiting is all.”

“Waiting? Waiting for what? Nada sucede mientras espera. Only while doing.”

“Just take them, Jesus...I'm waiting for clients. What else am I supposed to do? You want me to what? Knock on doors or something? Something like that would be good? God.”

“Y'all arguing in my restaurant? It's a Sunday y'all. Now's not the time. Folks is trying to enjoy life.”

“Don't mind if I do...”

“Not like y'all. Y'all always fumbilin.”

“And she doesn't even eat it...the last time. And I mean it this time. Tan barato.”

“I’m doing okay. I’m doing well, actually. I had two clients just this week. Which is a new record, so there’s growth then.”

“¿Dos? Que es dos? Dos no es nada. Dos es más que uno. Son menos de cuatro, incluso. La mitad de cuatro. That’s it.”

[DEADHEDRED37] lol u need some leverage...i gotchu

[afxfn4.82454201] ah family stuff then

“Are you doing a good job at least?”

[shesellsbeesgills] gee thanks!

“Well, actually, one of my clients this past week is actually a journalist and she wants to interview me. I don’t know if I wanna do it, though.”

“What!?”

[*DEADHEDRED37 changed their username to urafuckingidiot*]

“Y’know, matter of fact, I saw one of your billboards. So dessert or no?”

“It’s ten in the morning, Bernie...”

“You are doing this interview! No questions asked. You said yes, right?”

“I mean...like not really, I guess? She was on vacation and she probably still is, so, like...”

“So call her up right now while she’s free!”

“I mean, it couldn’t hurt right, María...”

[shesellsbeesgills] FUCK OFF

[urafuckingidiot] lololololl

[*urafuckingidiot changed their username to DEADHEDRED38*]

“Mama. The lady’s on vacation. She literally cannot schedule a formal appointment. She’s got like bosses and editors to get through first. Again, because she’s on vacation.”

[DEADHEDRED38] new year new me 😎

“So call her up anyway. That’s her job, right? Journalists, they’re always on call. What else? Life’s a vacation.”

“Ah, Mrs. Shoemaker, to what do I owe the pleasure this beautiful morning?”

“Oh Bernie, I’m so glad I decided to make the walk out. I’ll have the usual: two eggs, sunny side up, and crispy toast with jam.”

“Two eggs, toast and jam, yes ma’am! And might I say, Mrs. Shoemaker, you do look mighty lovely this fine morning if I might say.”

[shesellsbeesgills] get that ass Bernie

“Oh, Bernie!”

[DEADHEDRED38] big nuttt

“I told her at the appointment that I would email her early next week, which is tomorrow.” She didn’t. But she probably would.

“Well, you better. I can’t hold your hand. You gotta do these things, that’s just what it is. No more money.”

[afxfn4.82454201] ahhhhhh they just put eva on netflix. Finally something I actually have!

[DEADHEDRED38] seen it it’s ight...

“So, there.”

“Can we please talk about something else? Please?”

“Sure, whatever.”

“How’s work going?”

“Fine.”

“Anything cool going on there?”

“What are you doing again, mom?”

“Filing.”

“...And do you enjoy it?”

[DEADHEDRED38] lol

“It’s fine.”

“Oh.”

“Well do you talk to your coworkers?”

“Lemme throw on a tune for ya, Mrs. Shoemaker, watch this...play The Beatles’ Greatest Hits.”

“Sometimes.”

[shesellsbeesgills] any ideas?

[DEADHEDRED38] not a one

Picture yourself in a boat on a river...

“Isn’t that somethin’, Mrs. Shoemaker?”

“Why, Bernie, I haven’t heard this song in thirty years! Since I lost that record, what was it...”

“Truly somethin’ else. Yes sir.”

“So...what kind of things do you talk about?”

“The Island. That’s all they talk about. You’d be best friends. Come with, I’ll introduce you.”

María and Daniella glanced over at each other with a gaze that spoke of opportunity.

“Well...I mean, you could, you know...”

[afxfn4.82454201] When are y'all gonna come and visit? It would be really cool if we could all hang out! :)

“That doesn't seem like—”

“Yeah, no. Mama, why don't you—”

“Oh, I know! I'll tell them all about your business! I bet they'll all want to check it out. Do you have business cards?”

“Uh, well, actually I've got a few coming in the mail...”

“Make business cards. Business cards are good.”

[DEADHEDRED38] maybe? idk stuff's like...weird right now.

[DEADHEDRED38] maria let me vet these things before you send them out u kno I've got eye for quality >:)

“Oh, uh, yeah, that'd be a pretty good idea. And they could tell all their friends, too!”

“Friends. Hm.”

“Your eggs'll be right out Mrs. Shoemaker! Some tune, huh? Better than that rap stuff.

Harrowing.”

“Just filthy, if you ask me.”

“Bernie, the check?”

“Somewhere to go? Hmm?”

[afxfn4.82454201] ooo I wanna see next!

“Uh huh. No dessert, then? Witch. Oh, those eggs!”

“Remember. Business cards.”

“Right. Business cards.”

[DEADHEDRED38] business cards?

[shesellsbeesgills] business cards

[afxfn4.82454201] yes

“Play Raspberry Beret! Here’s your sunnies, toast and jam, ma’am!”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Well, I’ll text you, Mom.”

“Me first. I’ll text you first, hija.”

“Okay. Peace.” María stands up out of the cramped booth and turns to Daniella. “Later.”

“Later.”

[DEADHEDRED38] well thank god that’s over. wanna get ice cream?

[shesellsbeesgills] uh...not really

[DEADHEDRED38] :(see you there!

[afxfn4.82454201] save me a seat!

“Volume up! And play Marvin Gaye next.”

Mrs. Shoemaker forks off a chunk of egg white, chews, and winces. Something about these eggs wasn’t quite right, she thought.

Chapter 15 - Kenji Kuze

“I’ll go get it.”

He gets up from the silken couch housed in the living room of their two-room apaato to answer the noise at the door.

“Please accept my apologies for the late disturbance! A package for 380-0921! The name is: Fumitake Kase. Are you him?”

Kenji didn’t bat an eye. “I am.”

A haitatsunin with a delicate balance between panache and haste presses a hefty cardboard package into Kenji’s chest, him snappily cradling it in his arms so as not to drop it.

“Please sign this tablet on the line to confirm delivery of this item.”

“I see.” The furniture here was still quite sparse, so there was nothing to place the package on while he writes his signature. Instead, he grabs the stylus with his dominant hand and signs the tablet, grasping the heavy box upright so as not to potentially damage its mysterious innards.

“Thank you, please have an enjoyable evening!” He bows and heads Kenji’s leftward down the balcony overlooking two parallel roads, all but deserted in the Thursday crepuscular twilight.

Kenji guesses that his may have been the haitatsunin’s final delivery for the day. The sun’s descent beneath the horizon is arresting; Kenji forgets how strange this sudden delivery had seemed.

His hands preoccupied, he shuts the door with his right shin.

“You can come out now.”

Fumitake walks out from the kitchen and sits back down at their living room couch, gripping a cup of water in his left hand.

“I was just thirsty, is all.”

“Mmm.”

“Did you want anything?”

“No. What is this?” Kenji looks down, grimacing.

“Why don’t you open it up and take a look inside?”

Kenji paws at the packing tape with his nails, walking forward toward his reclining chair so he’ll be able to rest the package on his thighs.

“Actually, wait, no, don’t open it yet!”

“Hmm? But you just said to open it...”

“Well, I changed my mind! It’s not the day, yet, is it?”

Kenji smiles meekly, turning to stare out their sliding glass doors leading to their balcony, where clothes hang to dry. The old CRT and mottles of what was left of the day’s light piercing the glass’ veil are all that illuminate the apaato. Kenji and Fumitake are more than content with that. Keeps the building landlord happy and reduces stress. He puts the package on the carpet flooring beneath the coffee table which doubles as their dining area.

“Pretend you can’t see it.”

“I thought we had an agreement,” Kenji interjects, turning back to Fumitake with a slight air of condescension hinting about his inflection.

“I know we did. But I can’t really be trusted not to break the rules. And it was supposed to arrive tomorrow. That’s what the order page said. I had it all planned out...”

Kenji closes his eyes and reclines in his chair with a lazy slump. “While I’d be working. Smart, even though it didn’t really work.”

Fumitake changes from sitting to lying down, absorbed by the couch's firm and new cushions.

He pats Kenji's knee with his left foot. "So how are you going to make it up to me, then?"

Kenji gets up to change the channel. With a rehearsed twist, he lands directly on ANN, who are displaying a broadcast about an investigation into the legality of Peach Aviation's subsidized Island one-way express flights. "Make it up to you?" He turns the volume up a bit and sits back down. "That's not really in the spirit of the thing. Plus, we had a deal." The investigation was long and drawn-out, having first been reported on months ago.

"Well, that's true, but..." Fumitake looks forlorn. "...I was hoping maybe you had done the same for me."

In fact, the arrival of Fumitake's surprise gift—whatever it was—could not be more inconvenient for Kenji, who had also bought something for Fumitake against their previously established pact. So formal was this agreement that the two had both signed a piece of paper in ink stating that they would under no circumstances buy the other an anniversary gift. But then a customer at his shop had managed to upsell the grizzled cook on a fancy piece of jewelry: lapis lazuli, though Kenji had not at the time thought to ask if it were real. Authentic or not, lapis lazuli in Japan is rare, he thought, and blue is Fumitake's favorite color; plus the two weren't exactly dilettantes of the finer things in life, so it may as well have been the real thing. The salesman marketed his wares at a "limited-time" price so prescient that Kenji had also neglected to consider whether or not Fumitake would be home when the order would arrive. These were things one has to consider when acting on anything within the watchful confines of a relationship, and these were certainly not things Kenji was used to having to worry about. He allocated those sorts of stresses

on Fumitake as part of a sort of romantic consignment agreement, and in his mind he'd been sold a bill of goods that this contract would never be impinged upon. Again, it had been a long time.

“Uh, well...perhaps I'll reconsider, then. But only since you broke the agreement first, of course.” Kenji feels in biting his tongue that he's managed a victory out of this sordid situation. Neither of them were paying much attention to the broadcast.

“Hmm. Well maybe you will, then.”

Fumitake closes his eyes. *A bit early for that, don't you think?* Kenji thinks to himself. “Should I put something else on?” he says.

“Mmm, no. I think this is fine.” Fumitake's eyes remain shut and he does not move from his previously assumed fetal position.

“Then I'll just watch this then.” But he was not watching the news. Such was the life of this sole owner and operator of a small ramen shop: the struggle between whether or not to feel more guilty about seemingly disappointing Fumitake or to feel more guilty about not having done more prep work for the next day's inevitable blitz of good old-fashioned business. For Kenji had managed to make something of a name for himself. His impressive culinary skills absorbed by osmosis from another life had finally begun to pay dividends for him, translating into a steady income generated by a not so meager handful of repeat customers; no small feat in today's incredibly crowded landscape! And so Kenji Kuze would go on to feel a warped sort of survivor's guilt over feeling prideful at having managed to stake out a name for himself when he should be busy on his night off feeling guilty at having upset the sole reason he had left the shop a mess in the first place. And so for what seemed like hours when in actuality it was only minutes he hemmed and hawed in the domain of his mind, three mindsets all clashing at once yet

each ill-equipped to reign victorious over the dominion of all people that is the conscience. Not to be forgetful about the ironic nature of his having created this gauntlet for himself to do battle with in the first place.

Kenji, despite occupying the apartment alongside Fumitake at this very moment, felt alone, and worst of all when he felt alone he felt awkward. This was a feeling he had devised a labyrinthine system of balancing plates to either subdue or better yet outright eliminate: the life partner, the shop, the background noise from the television set; these were constants in place, to be supplemented by the occasional surprise party, or a surprise gift, or surprise takeout. But if any one piece of that rickety scaffolding were even a centimeter out of place, it could bring this entire emotional suppression structure careening, and him down with it. Not that he was aware of any of this. He was a real salt of the earth type, one who embodied an ideology he felt missing from the future of this country: the ability to be self-sufficient, to exist devoid of the presence of another, though of course throughout his life there was little evidence of him having practiced such an ideal. *How in such times are we to rebuild this once great nation with such people steering our future?* he thought. The youth would destroy us all. This he knew with ardency. So too did he resent the dues he felt they'd yet to pay to country, that dubious tax which seemingly all above a certain age are led to believing the younger should have to pay, inexorably bound to some unspecified social contract. Never the once could he notice any sort of contradiction, for too preoccupied was he with the next day's bread.

"Erm...is there anything you'd like me to get you?"

"...Huh? What did you say?" Fumitake sits up from his half-realized slumber.

"A glass of water or-"

“Well, I’ve already got that, Kenji-kun.”

“Oh, that’s right...”

Fumitake gets up. It’s still a bit light out, and Fumitake grabs the package Kenji had placed aside, not to be opened until the right time. “You should open it now.”

“But...we had an agreement.”

“You should open it.”

“I...are you sure?”

“Yes! Open it. Please.” Fumitake smiles warmly. It’s doubly reassuring for Kenji.

“Well, if you insist...”

Having had little luck with his bitten-up nails, Kenji Kuze comes to his senses and heads to the kitchen to procure a knife with which to open the package. But what few cutting knives they had were dirty, as neither had the time nor the conviction to take some responsibility and wash a few dishes; not that they had any detergent on hand. Finger foods like convenience store snacks, fast food and pizza were mainstays. Their combined incomes facilitated this bachelor-esque lifestyle; not to mention how much they’d lucked out on the rent. Monthly payments at three-quarters of the price thanks to Kenji’s...ineffable capabilities for persuasion. Of the unsanitary blades he chose the sharpest to hose down, his resolve for a purely squared home life having already been uprooted given the busy lives the two lived.

He dries it off on his shirt just in case his gift were in some way non-resistant to moisture, looking up and over at the CRT as he nonchalantly re-dirtied the knife. Yet another broadcast about the Island. This was all anybody seemed to care about these days. He had not been. He had neither the interest nor the time to spend on such fantasies. But more relevantly he hadn’t the

space in his head, so clouded was his mind by stress and the recursive machinations of guilt which all needed each other to prop themselves up against. How much did he truly have if these parasitic leeches were for the rest of his time to be his idea of a balanced life? Never once did he consider the idea that perhaps the Island could show him and by proxy Fumitake another way to be, but they are too content with the way things are to change any one thing. Never did he believe those who told tale of the Island's profound restorative abilities. To Kenji Kuze it was all hogwash designed and engineered to distract from the real problems we as a global society are currently facing head-on, and in particular those local to Japan; just don't ask him what those problems specifically are.

But too large were these problems and dilemmas both of the planet and of country for him to handle on his own, and too stubborn was he to do away with his predilections and inhibitions to accept help from anyone beyond an increasingly narrow sliver of individuals. He had been wronged in the past; not again. Kenji knew that the only life worth living was one in which the self has complete and utter dominion over every single constituent element which makes one tick. This was non-negotiable.

“So do you like it, or...?”

A self so central and singular that Kenji Kuze could not see past it. This was the life he wanted, the life he was living. But for how long? A question he tried not to ask yet in those clumsy moments of solitude he couldn't help himself.

“Because I can return it, you know...”

Something was changing, something just beyond that horizon outside the window where the sun had set and the cityscape now looked gloomier for it; a different Nagano for a different world.

“Great! Because actually I can’t.”

Chapter 16 - Eviction Warning

PENNSYLVANIA NOTICE TO QUIT

Dennis Wisolek

1029 W Nevada St., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19133

(267) 411-0793

gogoeagless2@gmail.com

Date April 20th, 2019,

To María Camila Rosario Velázquez,

And all individuals (tenants, occupants, and subtenants) in possession of the Premises

The Premises herein referred to in this official notice to quit is located at 1801 W Norris St., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 19121 with a lease agreement commencing on July 4th 2018 between María Camila Rosario Velázquez and Dennis Wisolek. This notice to quit has been sent by the Landlord to the Tenant(s) due to the non-payment of rent.

In accordance to the laws in the State of Pennsylvania WITHIN TEN (10) DAYS after service on you of this notice to quit, you are hereby required to pay via check to the undersigned Landlord or an Authorized Agent the back-rent including any late penalties or other fees accumulated of which you now hold possession amounting to the sum of \$1,120.79. If payment is not made you will be required to quit and deliver up the possession of the premises at the end of the ten (10) day period.

YOU ARE FURTHER NOTIFIED THAT the Landlord does hereby elect to declare that forfeiture of your lease agreement under which you hold possession, to the above-described

premises, if you fail to perform or otherwise comply will institute legal proceedings to recover rent and possession of said premises which would result in a judgment against you including costs and necessary disbursements together with possible statutory damages as allowed by law for such unlawful possession of the premises.

Dennis Wisolek

María,

I've tried everything, and I'm sorry, but at this point I have to do what I have to do. You've received several phone calls and emails to all the addresses I have on file for you. I even tried asking your mother. I know that things are not easy and haven't been since what happened to Paul. Nothing was your fault. We're all just trying to move on, and it's difficult. But you've gotta work with me here, otherwise I have to do what's best for the family and what's best for you. I'll bump this up to thirty days, tops. If you can't get the money, I'm sorry, but it'll have to be what it is. You have your mom and your sister in town. Why not just shack up with them? No shame in that at all. Give it some thought.

Uncle Dennis

Chapter 17 - Profile

BOSTON—It's hard not to see why people all over the world today are a bit on edge. We're at war, and people are dying. Climate change is taking its toll on the planet, and it seems nothing will be done about it.. The people of Flint, Michigan are still without good, clean water. Syrian refugees still struggle to find places they can call home, away from all the terror. It can be difficult to catch a glimpse of light through all the darkness. For some, the spontaneous arrival of the island nearly smack-dab in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean has brought with it a new lease on life. Visions of the future, ghosts of passed loved ones, euphoric experiences, or even horrifying experiences; you name it, somebody's probably experienced it in that strange place. Of course, there are many who seek to discredit the experiences that those with the time and money available to visit this isle of mangroves as delusions of wealthy grandeur. Maria Velazquez, a 34-year-old who lives in an unassuming apartment in Philadelphia, PA, has opened a business which she describes as "basically therapy for those who've visited the Island." She believes in the profound nature of the Island and those who have had the good fortune to visit it and wants to provide an avenue exclusively for these people to vent about their experiences. "When I first heard stories about it on TV and online, I thought it was really interesting, just like everyone else," she says. "It seemed like anything was possible, so I wanted to try and reach out to the first handful of people who visited to try and get their thoughts. It was purely selfish at first, but then I realized I could make a pretty unique business out of the situation."

Ms. Velazquez isn't a therapist by trade; she graduated from the University of Central Florida in 2006 with a B.S. in Communications. She feels her inexperience is part of what she feels made

her the perfect candidate to erect such a company. “When I first started, I was sort of making things up along the way. But that didn’t really matter much to my clients, because they were just looking for someone to listen who wasn’t a friend or family member and also didn’t approach the situation strictly through the lens of a traditional therapist.” Her clients tell the *Herald* that this was part of her appeal. “I really like talking to Ms. Velazquez. She’s really nice and helpful and was willing to talk online which I thought was very cool,” explained Mr. Ted Thompson, one of Ms. Velazquez’s first clients. Mrs. Gabriella Marquez agrees, stating, “I really felt seen in a certain way that other people, even my own family just couldn’t seem to provide for me. She was where I needed when I needed it.”

Ms. Velazquez first reached out to Mr. Christian Munch, a thirty-four year old man from New York City whose father Mr. Trent Munch inherited the role of CEO of British Petroleum from his father Mr. Thomas Munch and infamously steered the oil and gas giant into financial ruin. Mr. Munch, now deceased, confessed to Ms. Velazquez that he elected to visit the island for a simple reason: he felt he had nothing to lose. “I was overwhelmingly saddened to hear of [Mr. Munch’s] untimely passing. I could tell the island truly affected him in a very deep way. I tried to keep in contact with Christian in the months after he left, but unfortunately he never responded when I did. He was a good man, just troubled.”

Ms. Velazquez, the older daughter of two Puerto Rican immigrants, was born in Miami, FL but quickly moved to Lawrence, Kansas along with her parents at the young age of two. “I’ve been back to Miami a few times since I lived there and have a lot of love for the city.” She jokingly adds, “I think my mom just wanted to avoid the stereotype of being a hispanic living in Miami.” But the topic of her childhood and adolescence remains something of a sore subject for her,

having lost her father to a driver under the influence at the young age of eight. “There was also just a lot of prejudice that you had to deal with as a Latina girl growing up there.” A year later, her mother packed up the station wagon along with Ms. Velazquez and her baby sister Ms. Daniella Velazquez and headed for Philly. She graduated from West Philadelphia High School summa cum laude and promptly moved to Orlando to study at UCF. “Honestly, I got pretty depressed in college. It’s pretty common, I hear.” She moved back to Philadelphia to live with her mother a couple more years before moving out, doing odd jobs to make ends meet. When asked about her life post-college, she answers only, “Some things happened, and mostly, I felt kind of lost. But anything that happened led me to where I am now, so I tend to not get too bogged down in the details of it all.”

Ms. Velazquez tells the *Boston Herald* that she feels acutely aware of all the sadness and pain that people are feeling in these troubled times. “It’s not really that I think the island is going to be the source of all this true happiness for people, and I also don’t think that it should be. But I think it’s doing more good, and it seems here to stay.” When asked about her theories on where the island came from, she seems reticent to give a definitive answer. “I think about it like my favorite movies: it’s probably best not to know all the details. Spoils some of the fun.” Similarly, she dismisses the notion some have come forth with, that the island’s circumference is increasing beyond its initial size, as nothing but mere superstition based solely on conjecture.

Ms. Velazquez, it seems, is merely offering the service of listening. Indeed, many will balk at the premise of her business plan as wholly inept. But quietude and attention are sorely-missed commodities in today’s chaotic geopolitical landscape, one upended with the arrival of the

island. In all this disarray, perhaps what's best is to use these new kinds of experiences not to
blow chasms between each other, but instead to build bridges. AS

Chapter 18 - Comment Section

trentvann: oh damn she's hot AF

estellebabby: girl this is 🔥🔥🔥 🙏🙏”

sallyjonesprotestant101: GOD SPEAKS. HE SAYS: THIS IS PAGAN HERESY. THIS IS AGAINST GOD'S WILL. THE LORD JESUS CHRIST HAS SPOKEN. GOD BLESS AMERICA - SALLY JONES

lisa_vanderlyle_: @Markus Fowler

devinraposooo: ;))

dixbagelsncoffee: what's the email address? EDIT: oh I see it now lol

stevenho0ver: paypal or venmo available?

_drizzystansOnly: @champagnepapi u see this?

stoopkidafraid: I sent two emails and haven't heard anything back yet :((

p7ran0idandr0id: @dixbagelsncoffee it's on there, on the bottom. could stand to be a bit bigger tho...

fortniteallniteeverynite: FREE V-BUCKS CLICK THIS LINK <https://bit.ly/4zoospL>

REFERRAL CODE: "FORTNITEALLNITEEVERYNITE"

transcendentalmeditationguru: Friends, the island is nothing but lies. It will not bring you enlightenment. It will not show you a new way. It will not change your life. True happiness comes from diving deep within the self. Do not believe this woman, who seeks only to profit off of your fascinations and ignorances. Transcendental meditation is the only true way to bring about inner peace and outer prosperity.

mallory_jintosh: just made my first appointment, very excited! :)

vextris_07: @fortniteallniteeverynite BAD LINK this is a virus, don't click, you won't get free v-bucks, just a virus on your computer :(try opening it on your phone if u don't believe me

carter11118: not sure if my application went thru? not great feedback, just redirected me to the original website after i hit submit

carter11118: nvr mind just got the confirmation email lol wish me luck!

buildthatwall86: FUCKIN SPICK, FUCK U CUNT

teresaschaltz: @buildthatwall86 🙄 go back to ur hole, trump

gonzo_beens: @carter11118 luck!

Chapter 19 - Expansion

Free time for María Camila Rosario Velázquez had by May of 2019 gone the way of the dodo. At the age of 34, she had grown up just before the age when computers and smartphones were basically an appendage of the body. *34 is young, but I am not youthful*, she thinks to herself every time she finds herself opening a new window when she means to open a new tab, or when she misses an incoming call by crucially forgetting that one must slide the solid color button with their finger to answer, not merely press it. Yet another brain fart to add to an ever-stacking list. She had finally gotten around to devising something of a schedule she would have to follow if she were truly looking to get anything done, for she had wanted all this. She paid for the advertising space, she agreed to Mrs. Saha's profile, and so now she would have to actually do the work which comes part and parcel with participating in all manners of public-facing ephemera. The schedule's existence on paper would help María to get things done, and since when working at her fullest capacity she was more than capable of actually getting ahead of this schedule, sticking to the schedule could in theory allow her to have some actual free time to spend however she'd like: to catch up on her reading, to catch up on a show on Netflix, to catch up on a show on Hulu before the next episode dropped, to take a much-needed walk or two per day, to remember to cook so she could eat something with some degree of nutritional value once in a while, to keep up with the going-ons in the world, both locally to Philadelphia, within the United States, and important geopolitical happenings which were important to be up on in case such an event were to be brought up in idle conversation on the off-chance that María decided to attend a party or other sort of social gathering. In truth, all these important things one has to do in life to keep their head above water were merely a function of her labor, necessary evils which

neglecting would have a knock-on effect on the other parts of her life. Everything she did was in service of the work, the woman behind the curtain calling all the shots.

That was Ms. Velázquez. While María was occupied carrying the corporeal burdens of exercise and good hygiene and clean air and an inviting studio apartment and remembering to text mom and Daniella back and updating the text file full of the year's literature she'd managed to get through for the Discord book club and staving off a perpetual obsolescence of the mind and spirit, Ms. Velázquez would field inquiries which never ceased to pile onto their joint email inbox. She'd scribble a signature above chicken scratch level upon dotted lines and print her initials as was necessary for important official documents as they came, making sure every envelope was appropriately stamped, the intended addresses effacing these envelopes all clearly legible, and each placed gently within the mail cubby to deter any unwanted creases or dirt stains; it was María's job to wipe down the inside of the mailbox once a week. And while she was doing that, the full breadth and depth of Ms. Velázquez's mental acumen would operate within the prefrontal cortex to either assess and draft out a comprehensive dossier of who and what else needs addressing ranked by priority or append and change a pre-existing one; all mapped out inside of her mind to save time on scribing out the list, since she'd already used up time on a broader macroschedule. Ms. Velázquez would utilize subconscious brain cycles to analyze and submit incremental improvements for her outward-facing behavior toward both current and potential clientele while María would vacuum and sweep or prepare a salad.

This was all on a good day, however. For as much as María felt herself a dinosaur when it comes to technology (also in age, much to the chagrin of her mother, Bernie, and Rodrigo), she was still susceptible to frequent alterations in her attention span and mood, conditioned as she and all

citizens of the twenty-first century are by the internet. María did not know how to turn off push notifications on her phone and thus was inundated by them day-in and day-out. The sultry combination of major key arpeggio jingle with the pleasing gentle glow of her LG LTE's liquid crystal display and the one or two or three buzzes it'd emit were too tempting to ignore. It would depend on the number of vibrations which person would react: María or Ms. Velázquez. For one or three vibrations, she knew to let Ms. Velázquez handle it. Ms. Velázquez would register the alert and wait a sensible amount of time to respond so as not to appear as prissy or too on top of things to whoever it was; or maybe that was just María wanting to pace herself for mental health reasons. But for two vibrations it was fair game, as the two both used a number of applications which sent two vibration signals to the motor hardware. María would drop everything with expediency and claw at the phone like some feral animal and look, praying that this would be her shift to take over. These were often more frivolous things like social media notifications and Discord server messages, but within the combined mental hierarchy which both María and Ms. Velázquez had access to would register as meaningful and worthy of responding to for reasons of self-care; you can't be on all the time, after all!

Such aberrations in focus deigned to become something fiercely damaging to their productivity. Yet without the presence of these distractions something was missing, the two tended to agree. The problem often was that the distraction would lead to procrastination, with María taking center-stage in helming the direction of how the next set of minutes would pan out. She'd always negotiate for a speck of free time by saying that they'll continue their work at the top of the next hour, a transition in her head so seamless that it would be like they never lost that twelve or thirty-two minutes. She'd spend that time oscillating back and forth between scrolling through

her news feed and thinking about how best she and Ms. Velázquez could divide and conquer a bunch of unaccounted for labor at the top of the next hour, which is when they would stop everything they weren't doing and get on with it. So fleeting were these oscillations that she would be wholly unable to utilize this period of non-productivity for anything resembling valuable rest and recoup. A snake biting its own tail, she would have thought, if she or even the more refined Ms. Velázquez were in any way capable of coming up with anything save for glibly canned responses to whatever stimulus bursted their way. But in these microperiods of stress the two shared an uncanny penchant for dysfunction, and so in some twisted way Ms. Velázquez and María together would become something of an indelible force not to be reckoned with.

This was the inefficient way María—and by extension Ms. Velázquez—had chosen to delegate her time; on weekends, that is. For on weekdays—much to the chagrin of many clients who either worked or simply didn't see weekdays as for *this sort of thing*—she was fully dedicated to session work with clients who had scheduled appointments. She had with some help from her more tech-savvy sister devised a process through Squarespace for her website

'MariaVelazquez.com' (the SEO on this one wasn't so hot but María insisted they go with it for two reasons: one, it made her seem smaller and more relatable to the layman; two, lacking any sort of creative inspiration in the period of time when she filed for incorporation, she resorted simply to using her name as a business title, thereby entitling the company 'María Velázquez Inc.')

which only required interested applicants to submit their personal information as well as proof of having visited the Island by way of a full scan of their ticket including order number.

The one-two punch of the advertising campaign enacted by Mads' Ads! and the serendipitous profile opportunity by Aasthika Saha of the Boston Herald (who had herself become a repeat

client of María's) skyrocketed the popularity of María's business at a rate unsustainable by anyone looking to live a healthy work-life balance. At first, María seemed reticent to put down the money on renting an office space, worried that the monkey's paw might clench were she to prod too hard at every immediate opportunity presented her way. Soon, though, it became obvious that her landlord wasn't going to play nice when María had a line of five or often over ten people crowding up the hallway leading up to her meager apartment. Even as she would do her best to dress up the apartment as something more than it is, a sanitary place glimmering with a DIY sort of chic, at some point she had to call a spade a spade and hunker down on a dedicated space. So she took a Saturday off to scrub through listings on a litany of office space rental agencies in Philadelphia. Her demands were simple and few: was it modestly clean and decent-looking, would it require any sort of contracting work done on it (an instant disqualifier for her), did it have something which given proper decorating work could be jury rigged to resemble a hybrid waiting room and entertainment lounge space, did it have an actual office which would have room for María's desk, her chevroned Bergère (which at this point had become somewhat synonymous with her brand, appearing in each of the three different images of Ms. Velázquez she had provided to the ad agency; each taken by Daniella on her expensive 12 MP iPhone camera with just a dash of mood lighting shot through her apartment window in a couple minutes between appointments), and would she be able to see it and subsequently sign a lease on it that same day. A part of her hoped this would not be possible, as she was also hoping to be able to use that Sunday as something of an off-day where she could take a breather and leave Ms. Velázquez behind at home; but when she stumbled upon an opening for a studio space by Paper Box Studios on Craigslist available to be viewed later that same day, she figured this

might be her only opportunity to get her foot in the door of an office without having to get her mother and sister involved on her behalf, god forbid. The open space had something of a homely look to it which immediately inspired in María confidence in the future of the business: glossy laminate floors, brick walls, gently-vaulted wooden ceilings, aged baseboards, windows for natural lighting, and signs of wear and tear about the walls but never dilapidated to a point of dereliction gave the space a homely demeanor which she thought might feel more inviting to first-time clients; plus it had all the amenities and creature comforts you'd expect out of a professional operation like this. One of a number of restored studio spaces, she particularly appreciated how the new office managed to feel contemporary by evoking signs of Philadelphia's yesteryear in a way which brought it in line with modern trends in revitalization of forgotten monuments and buildings. After a quick tour by the previous tenant—who was also haunted by the spectre of eviction, though María's overnight success had lifted that weight—María without much of a thought about it all grabbed the pen, signing for herself and on behalf of another.

The move-in process was quick and surprisingly painless. Her mother had had an old desk very much in line with María's what's-old-is-new aesthetic goals for the business. She bought five chairs for the lobby, two for the client's side of her desk, and another for her immediate work space, all at bulk price. They loaded it all up and into the office on two trips back and forth from the Staples and her office using Daniella's on-off boyfriend's F-150. For a third trip starting at her apartment she took the coffee maker for the lobby and a family photo to display 'proudly' in the office, much to the visible consternation of her mother. She hooked up her LCD flat-screen in the lobby and kept it tuned to 6abc, hiding the remote and using an antenna to keep down on

costs; at first she tried her best to conceal the v-shaped antennae out of fear that they'd look ridiculous on top of a decent modern monitor, but no configuration of the twin antennae would yield a clear image; plus, again, her aesthetic. When her family and Daniella's boyfriend felt they'd expended enough free labor as was appropriate, María bought a welcome mat for the outside entryway, a water cooler and a grabbag of cheap magazines from the checkout lane at Walmart. She framed her bachelor's degree and certificate of incorporation on the wall behind her seat and dumped various papers all over the desk. All in a Sunday's work! She spent the rest of the day phoning and emailing the coming week's clients to inform them ahead of time of her new address, then prodded her sister during what little was left of her day off about scrubbing any trace of her apartment's address off the website until she caved.

Everything was in place for Ms. Velázquez to begin building the business out in a bigger way than before. Clients came and so the money was good, and the money was good because her rates were just right; she charged \$50 for the first hour and added on an extra \$20 for every ten minutes that a session ran over their designated hour. Soon she was full up on appointments through August, then September, then the rest of the year, just like that. In June, to accommodate these rising tides, she brought on her first hire for a position she spent days deciding on a title for, before landing on a mouthful: "Office Maintenance and Upkeep Specialist"; essentially a combination of a receptionist, errand runner, and sometimes janitor if the situation calls for it. A fellow Boricua, Georgia Camacho-Almodóvar took the job as his first in Philly, having just moved there from San Mateo to care for his sick mother. María chose him out of a number of potential candidates for two reasons: he didn't have a criminal record and he could speak Spanish. Georgia had gotten it in his head that at some point he too would be able to do whatever

it was he thought María actually did; for client confidentiality reasons, the door to María's office was always shut when an appointment was in session, and try as he might, Georgia could never quite make out what transpired between the two thanks to the thick brick walls.

Of course, none of this pomp and circumstance mattered much if her ability to listen—or rather, her ability to sit and stare and bark rehearsed one-liners like, “Mhm,” and “Right,” and “Interesting...I see. What do you make of that, personally?”—weren't there. This component, the actual sessions, didn't change one bit in the transition from apartment to office space. As such, it lost none of its potency, and so clients kept showing up; Ms. Velázquez attributed this successful translation to her astutely-chosen decorum—or was it María's? In truth, neither María nor Ms. Velázquez had ever quite pinned down what it was that attracted visitors of the Island to her business. Perhaps they were all just lonely individuals looking for someone to talk to who felt a bit let down when the Island couldn't give them that. Some clients were attached to their Island visitation experience like it were an appendage, a memory that could prop them up whenever they were feeling down about the state of their lives. Some just wanted somebody to believe their stories, as even though the Island had become universal in its notoriety, many including scientists and academics of a certain stately renown ranged from apprehensive to outright dismissive of reports of Island visions. María, having never actually visited the Island for herself, could never truly be sure who was telling the truth and when, though she had little reason to doubt that something was up with that place.

Their stories were varied in scope and subject matter, but María knew never to challenge the seemingly limitless extent of the human imagination. One man would relay to her in excruciating levels of detail all the licentious acts he performed at a house party orgy session created by the

Island, one he claimed he wished for three times in front of his bathroom mirror before visiting and that the Island was gracious enough to grant him. Reports of explicit wish fulfillment by the Island were dubious at best, and so María chose to write this one off. Plus, the guy just sort of had a sketchy vibe to him. A different man who stunk of marijuana and conspiracy theory websites told her that he nearly got kicked out from the point of entry on the Island after refusing to an armed guard to relinquish his camera, believing that the U.N. had hired sleeper operatives from all around the world to guard the inside of the Island, only to be activated when somebody (him) uncovered the dark truth behind the curtain: aliens, space aliens, a new Area 51, or rather an Area 52, used by (but not limited to) the U.S. and Saudi Arabian governments to control the brain-dead masses. After leaving and hiding his camera in a place only he would ever find—in a bush—he returned to the waiting room to get his money’s worth, wherein he says he walked through the mangrove brush and into the interior of a massive cardboard packing box, of which he was its only contents. He went on to explain that his visit led to a series of strange and mysterious phone calls from distorted voices claiming to be from the IRS, they looking to arrest him for unaccounted for revenue unless they are Venmo’d \$36,000 dollars by the end of the day. This part María had no trouble believing the validity of, though she doubted the two were related.

Such was the nature of visits and the people who spend the money to go on them; you simply never know what you’ll get. Maybe, she thought, this truly was the result of money’s corruption upon the febrile human brain, turning us all into insulated freaks and weirdos with diluted perceptions of the world and all its complex, unknowable machinations. If the Island or whoever put it there had had a political agenda, perhaps it had made itself known in humanity’s attempted

colonization of it. Though she felt guilty silently painting with broad strokes upon the ideological easel of plutocrats and politicians with nothing to lose, capitalists and technocratic futurists with disposable income to throw around like its candy at fairy tales; well, perhaps not.

As word spread through Philadelphia and Boston about the success of María's relatively simple business initiative, María and Georgia quickly got word that traditional therapists had begun offering Island visitor-specific therapy sessions. At first, María seemed nonplussed. When asked by clients what made her business unique from other, more established therapists in the field, Ms. Velázquez would simply smile and repeat her rehearsed refrain: "What we're doing is built from the ground-up to serve those who've visited the Island and are looking for a form of listening and understanding which speaks to their particular thoughts and feelings." But soon this defensive would begin to lose luster, as so too did others local to Philadelphia, Boston and surrounding metropolitan and suburban areas establish businesses aimed at staking out their own corner of this potentially lucrative opportunity space. At this, María went on the offensive. She changed the name of the business to "Velázquez Island-First Listenings." She put out a call and quickly hired for a new position, the description of which was worded in such a way that would obfuscate its utilitarian purpose, titled only "Research and Development Specialist". "As a Research and Development Specialist at Velázquez Island-First Listenings, you'll be at the cutting edge of the research of new and unprecedented treatment techniques for any and all Island-related psychological effects to be practiced on our client base." What this actually meant was: go undercover at other businesses, learn from what they're doing right and wrong, and feed that information back to VIFL so as to undercut their potential success. She administered a new

ad campaign which leaned into the fact that she was the original, painting her competitors as nothing but mere copycats attempting to profit off of the goodwill she'd managed to generate. With only two hires and the security blanket backbone of her mother and sister to land on in case it all went sideways, María and Ms. Velázquez together had built something sizable yet small, a creation they were unsure of atop what seemed to be a rickety foundation. Her advertising dollars dumped into anything that could fit her face and the ethically questionable clandestine operations underway at competitors seemed to be paying off for her, though there was no way to determine whether or not the same was happening to her right under her nose; the thought of it kept her up at night, not that she was sleeping much these days. Neither her nor Ms. Velázquez had all the answers to the future's questions, and that was just how it had to be. They couldn't afford to drown in it all. She'd pump more and more money into her advertising campaigns, expanding the reach of her little business that could until it seemed like she could do no more but hang on for dear life. She'd even gotten the hang of this computer thing. Over time, she would cede more and more control over to Ms. Velázquez just to come up for air once in a while until little of herself remained; though remember, whose name is signed on the paper again? She'd win this war and all other wars by a mere technicality if that's what it took.

Chapter 20 - Canela

“That girl is a disgrace. Another gringo, just like her father.”

Canela Amanda Velázquez is pacing around her kitchen, spurring obscenities in fits and starts, picking things up and putting them back down. She shares a sallow, tattered fourth-floor apartment space with no elevator since the building is too old to have one installed; it just meets fire marshall code, god forbid that moving target should aim directly at her landlord.

“What is she thinking, G, hm? G, are you hearing this? This girl, no, this woman....” She shoves a stack of Cosmopolitan magazines interspersed with browning manila envelopes off the chipped and peeling countertop. Canela had a case of the yelping or shirking or screeching fantods, jittering and quivering with an almost primeval dread which seeped through the crevices of the coarse travertine floor. “G. Gabriela! Punto! Wake up!”

Today is Gabriela’s turn at the bed, and she has no problem lying down and making the most of every single minute of it. Gabriela, also single, has developed something of a knack for drowning out the various yelpings and yappings Canela was prone to toss her way. Canela did this for no intentional reason, but Gabriela figured it was because she was looking for external validation.

Canela might say, Where did I go wrong? wait, nothing, then, Well, maybe they all turn out that way, wait, nothing, walk away to do something else. Or she’d fidget around in her seat, muttering fuck’s and shit’s and damn it’s just above under her breath; maybe she’d also be ostentatiously shuffling some garish and sumptuous contraption around, obviously having given up on getting whatever it was working, but too hubristic to explicitly ask for help, and too embarrassed to stoop so low as to admit to her dyspraxia. Such outbursts of undulating noise levels had become so common in their apartment on the fourth floor just on the outskirts of the

Badlands across from a perpetual construction site were so frequent so as to become something of a sonorous hum, an accompaniment to the soundscape of the typical clangs of silverware and TV news broadcasts and the Doppler effect from car horns; typical city slicker stuff, the kinds of hearing loss-inducing things you just have to resign yourself to accepting because that's life. Other times, you'd have to face it head-on, just to dial the thing down, if only for a little bit.

“What'd she do this time?”

To Gabriela, Canela's penchant for signposting the going-ons of her daily life—as morose and circular as the recursive loop of her life tended to be—was a necessary evil to surviving in this tough environment, especially if you were a *mexicano*. There was simply no choice for her at this point. She'd moved to Philadelphia with her now ex-husband Paco on a whim when he got a seemingly lucrative job offer from his cousin whose friend was starting a new business, one which in hindsight she kicked herself for not being able to see for what it truly was; Paco, more brawn than brains, was hired as a doorman for a brand new nightclub in NoLibs which was opened by an ex-cartel falcon having just finished his sentencing after a plea deal to turn over the location of three of his superiors went his way (he'd still managed to hide \$6,000 in cash he'd stolen from a beleaguered sicario in the ground in his grandmother's crawl space). When an off-duty volunteer cop discovered a plastic bag of cocaine in a toilet tank at the nightclub bathroom on break from a lap dance, the real deal cops were brought in not twenty minutes later, and Paco was implicated as hired muscle for a new and far less secure narcotics trafficking operation with the nightclub used as a laundering front; not that he was aware any of this was really going on. A quick Google search of the owner's name would yield story after story about

the arrest and subsequent release of a drug cartel member in Philly, so in a way this one was kind of on them.

And so there Gabriela was, forced to shack up with a stranger who first greeted her with a scowl and a leery sizing up, maybe making snap judgments about her behavior patterns or personality type based on her black t-shirt and blue jeans alone; not that Canela was really one to talk.

Gabriela and Paco called it quits after prison life changed him; luckily she didn't break her lease. Six years then they've lived there in that derelict apartment building, neither showing signs of having moved forward an inch, nor did either of the two ever really get much of a foothold on getting out of this place for good.

Until now, or at least so it had seemed to Gabriela. Her oldest daughter had seemingly tripped face-first, sticking with the landing with a rock-solid stuporous prostration into a both literal and metaphorical goldmine. It's not often that one's child manages to stumble upon a brand new market which requires little in the way of physical labor or mental dexterity so as to mine it for all its worth. Yet here Gabriela was, the mother of a prodigy of sorts. And she wanted her piece of the pie, and María Camila Rosario Velázquez, who was raised for most of her life childhood and all of her adolescence under the tender loving care and watchful eyes of her mother, was the oldest of two sisters, one who at her age ought to know that nothing lasts forever and mama's pushing sixty, was being a spoiled rotten brat about it. In Canela's words.

At first, Canela would give María the benefit of the doubt. After all, she's got a lot on her plate and is—should be!—fully dedicated to overseeing that every constituent piece of the labyrinthine puzzle that is incorporation be in place, every 'i' dotted and 't' crossed, every last dollar generated accounted for, all her taxes paid correctly and on time, etc. She was doing this almost

entirely by herself; that strange but nice boy at the receptionist's desk could only do so much, and María had on several occasions refused help from Daniela and herself. But at what point does naivete start to make way for ineptitude? María had agreed that she'd help out Canela—whose survivor's benefits checks had dried up and who kept forgetting to apply for disability because you had to call and she was barely home when Social Security were open—hadn't she? Surely she had, because Canela remembered the words coming out of her mouth in passing.

So where was the money? Lining that filthy mongrel's coffers, that's where.

“She won't give me any money! I'm her mother, dammit! Her goddamned mother! Idiota! that tonto ingrato, to think all the days I worked, all the beds I made!”

“Just give her time. She'll come around, I know she will.”

Gabriela figured that she wouldn't, and honestly she'd probably do the same were she put in María's position. Could you blame the gal? A millennial making a name for herself in the age of pricey health care payment plans, socks and sandals, data caps, bills stacking up, and in this news cycle? Forget about it! Take the money and run, I say! You did good! Gabriela would lavish María with all these haughty superlatives to grease the wheels and maybe make into María's next Thanksgiving dinner guest list (though would she have the time to host this year?) and then Christmas brunch (Gabriela would bake cookies to justify showing up) and then an Easter picnic (paint a couple plastic eggs and hide them in a tree or two), rinse and repeat until she shows up in María's will; famous people always die first, she thought.

“She won't even give a cent! I always paid for breakfast, and for lunch! What gives? What do I do? What did I do wrong?”

Gabriela never had a good answer for these kinds of questions; nor did she ever really have an answer for anything Canela espoused in her fits of rage. It was always in some loosey-goosey way about money. The loan guy wanted payments. The debt collector wanted payments. The credit card company wanted payments. Today, her coffee cost twelve more cents than it did just the day before. What gives? What's up with this water bill, what's up with that broadband internet bill? Dial-up was cheaper and fast enough for her; plus now we have cell phones!

“It's not me, right?”

“Um. No. It's not you, I suppose.”

She was so...demanding. Gabriela didn't really understand it. She couldn't; it's anathema to her own upbringing. In those times, you didn't beg. Those who earned, earned. Those who didn't, didn't, and that was just how it was. Gabriela was never a fervent reader, and thus was never exposed to important-sounding words like 'meritocracy' and all the biting social media critique they invited for those who bought into that sort of thing. It wasn't Gabriela's fault, she would think, were she able to be *in the loop* for these sorts of discussions more educated people reserved for tweet threads and podcasts; because she wasn't in the loop! She knew that if she could be better she would, but she can't so she isn't, not won't. Canela, to her, seemed more to fall into the former category of person: the type who reaches across the table without asking to pass it and complains when their hand is swatted away; the type who doesn't understand why people don't like when she shows up in the ten items or less lane with a full shopping cart; the type who spend all day clipping coupons but would rather order takeout, the type who shows up from a hair appointment while you're cooking something alone and asks why you didn't make enough for them; the type who is jealous and all worked up over the success of those close to

them but would never admit, would rather smile and grit their teeth through the boring conversations while cursing their name at the bathroom mirror. Gabriela knew that she was not that type of person; she was a go-getter who always tried her best but was just never dealt a good hand in life. She didn't need Paco, she didn't need children, and she certainly didn't need Canela Velázquez.

“Her sister doesn't seem to notice anything going on. She's always so busy with the internet and stuff. What's so good about online? What's going on there? I barely go on the internet, there's just no point to me. All seems so pointless. I'd rather go for a walk.”

Gabriela would notice this sort of thing too, wherein Canela would microanalyze all the ways she perceived herself as a marginally more well-adjusted person than the people closest to her, and would even do it in front of those very people she were judging. Right to their face. The nerve. Gabriela didn't understand it. What kind of person was Canela anyway? Who cares what makes other people happy? Doesn't Daniella have a boyfriend? That's more than I could say for you, that's for sure! Gabriela realized in that very instant that she could no longer ignore or shrug off Canela's incessant badgerings. Who does that? What sort of life? She had to say something in María and Daniella's defense.

“When are these kids going to learn, I wonder. Can barely cook anything or look after themselves.”

The question was what to say. Gabriela had lived a reserved and controlled life, one whose essential defining doctrine would decree that she should never if she could absolutely help it verbally interject in any conversation if she perceived that that intervening could in any way naturally lead to an uncomfortable situation for her to have to safely navigate her way out of. It

had suited her well up until this point; but that practice ended today, she thought. The problem then was that she spent so much time and brain cycles congratulating herself over the fact that she would no longer ‘take it’ so to speak that she neglected to think of a viable and biting retort to Canela’s rudeness. The longer she waited, the less potent her rebuttal would be; and the longer she thought of how humiliating a hesitant, lassitudinous reply would be, the longer it would take her to actually getting around to saying anything at all. Was this one of those Catch-23’s she’d heard so much about? Or was it a Catch-33? Whatever the case, she had to think of something quick, because with this next one, she could be risking it all.

“I-”

Hang on, she stopped herself. *You’ve got to live with this person. Oh no. Think! And why stoop down to her level?* She was right. This *was* a bad idea, though only in so much as willingly continuing to live with Canela in the same apartment, using the same kitchenware, shitting in the same bathroom, watching the same television set was. What good would this bring? Fuck it, maybe it’s time to give her a piece of—no, again, back where we started. After flailing about in her mind over how best to proceed, she’d worn herself down by attrition; let’s just let this one pass. There’ll be another time.

“Have you considered just, like, taking stuff from her?”

Hoo boy, now you’ve gone and done it. A whole other can of worms, pried right open, and you can smell it all. Though, really, in that split second of a moment where it seemed like forty different things might be happening all at once, it was hard to get a solid read on how Canela had taken it. Did she think it was a joke? Impossible; her humor ‘sense’ could be summed up by looking at funny, compromising images of cats doing things that cats don’t normally do but are

doing because they're domesticated and laughing about them repeatedly for upwards of two hours past the initial point of viewing. Was she offended? Hard to say; Gabriela had never really tried anything so gutsy like this before. Maybe she was actually considering it? No—

“Huh. I never thought about that.”

Uh oh.

“That’s a pretty good idea!”

Welp, there it is.

“I didn’t mean—”

“She’s got it coming, anyway. I mean, what kind of child just takes and takes and never gives back? A disrespect, is what it is. A disrespect to family. A disrespect to culture. A disrespect to heritage. Boricuas gotta stick together!”

This seemed like the first thing that Canela had ever said to Gabriela that made any sort of sense, though purely in its pathos appeal.

“How do you plan on—I mean, are you just gonna steal her money? What’s the plan here?” At this point Gabriela was more amused than anything. She was testing for the limits of Canela’s imagination; she realized that this absurd exchange was probably the most the two had ever spoken to each other at any given moment. Perhaps there was more that made her tick than meets the eye.

“Hm. I guess I didn’t think that far ahead.”

Gabriela just stared at her, holding back a chuckle.

“You Mexicans are good at breaking and entering, right? At least that’s what I heard.”

The conversation ended like it began, with Paco still in jail and the two women turning in without another word.

Chapter 21 - Last Break

With business picking up, the office working out, and the new hires having gone the way she hoped, things seemed okay for María. Fine, even. She had ceded all the day's labor at the office to the far more competent and productive Ms. Velázquez, leaving María herself to rest during the day and relax at night. She shifted all internet appointments from their usual late night slots to one in the afternoons on Friday through till six, and then all day Saturday. Work-life balance, she told herself. This left her with an honest to god day off and nights where she could return home to the apartment and not force herself to completely pass out just to have procured any amount of sleep for the next day's flurry. This scheduling change would also mean that she would have to inform via a batch of emails some of her appointments for September onward that they would have to be shifted around a bit and to provide them with a proposed alternate appointment time and date. Luckily, all affected seemed okay with the change; not like the types who visited the Island at this point in its history tended to have much going on. This left her with a day off. But how best to spend it? This sort of thing paralyzed María; but Ms. Velázquez? Forget about it. On Sundays the two had to bear the burden of each other's company, each vying for control over the body; they split the difference on the whole mind and spirit thing. Worst yet, the two never seemed to agree what counted as a valuable use of spare time. The staid Ms. Velázquez with her keen eye for efficiency above all else thought that they should be cleaning up the office to improve something like morale in the clientele base, or sitting in front of a web browser at a public library (with their computer's ancient operating systems helping to quell the vile temptations brought upon by multi-tab support) replying to important work-related emails, sizing up potential candidates for appointments for the new year to get a head-start, or organizing tax

documents early for when the season comes around and the two will wish they had. This was Ms. Velázquez's idea of a 'good time.' It's not that María didn't agree that these were solid uses of free time; but there was always that pesky work-life balance thing she'd read so much about on best practices for small businesses list which distracted her from the current task at hand whenever she caught herself getting *too* pulled in, it poking and prodding into her subconscious in some disorienting zigzagging fashion like a drill with the wrong bit attached. She needed to exercise more than she was. She needed the fresh air to clear her mind. She needed to think about things, to really process all that was going on. She was single and lonely; sometimes she wanted to get laid, though she'd try her best to stave off such productivity sappers on a given work day. Six days of sitting all day listening to other people's problems (she wasn't sure if there were a more appropriate term which existed in this particular corner of the therapeutic field) would do all that any more to any person. María was only human. After all, what was all this for if she didn't give the two the time and space to enjoy any of it? So even though she felt ridiculous because it was summer, she saw the clouds and thought, *Hmm, it might rain, and that could make it chilly, I'd better bring a coat* and began her walk.

Depending on the speed of her stroll, she might be able to file this excursion under the category of 'physical exercise.' She'd need to break a sweat (easy to do with a coat on) and get the heart pumping a bit. She walked at a pace of maybe a mile and a half per hour, careful not to strain herself too much out of fear of both tiring herself out and thus having to cut the trip short and also so she didn't run the risk of ruining the experience in a hurry. María decided that the best thing to do would be to just pick a direction, or rather feel a direction out—was it north? south?

east? northeast? south by southeast? that was sort of the point—and go. So she put on her blinders and headed a solid north.

María fretted about all the fussy little political negotiations of walking, like where on the sidewalk was best to give oneself the clearest and most obstruction-free route (though she couldn't stress to herself enough that this thing were to be about living for some ideal present) along their destination, a philosophy which dovetailed nicely with her desire for as little human-to-human, face-to-face communication as was possible; and if she did find herself in a situation which necessitated opening her mouth to espouse something which resembled a cogent thought, were it best to spit contextually reworded version of one of the same handful of platitudinous observations--some weather, huh? Yeah, that game was dull till the end of the fourth quarter. Interesting, I'm listening. No; that was Ms. Velázquez doing all the thinking and deciding for her. Sundays were her domain! They'd made an agreement, after all. María would come up with surprising and twee responses to any and all visual and aural stimuli which came her way, and that included people. Beautiful Sunday mornings like this one had a way of making a 'people person' out of even the most pessimistic and solipsistic of folks, the type of person who could offer the time of day to anybody, be they old family members or the diametrically opposed; for some this seemed easier to negotiate than others, but on days like this María thought she might give it a try.

She'd chat up the barista behind the counter brewing up all sorts of lattes and cappuccinos and frappuccinos and other Italian words she'd pretend to know at the artisanal coffee shop which she could make the time and money for to visit once a week and it just so happened this particular spot purely by coincidence were placed along the trajectory of her unrehearsed travel path. She'd

put up and even play along with all their lascivious flirtations irrespective of gender, and if she had a compatriot joining on one of these spur of the moment outings she'd write it off to them as nothing more than playful banter. When she or they passed by the park she used to have the time to frequent, she'd make sure now to always have a plastic baggie or two readied with bread crumbs for the birds. She'd wave at police officers who probably wouldn't wave back. She'd hold open doors and shake hands as appropriate. Maybe she'd even take a bus out to the beach to take in the weather once in a blue moon, but infrequently enough to keep feeling fresh and spontaneous. Maybe she'd splurge a little and buy some new clothes, or “digs” as she'd call them to herself, but never for work-related purposes; she'd had enough of anything and everything ‘business casual’ by that point in the week.

Perhaps then these trips gestured toward something of a new era or age or some other wistful thought for María Velázquez. The change in scenery became a necessity for her to function; she wondered how she had done this line of work without the Sunday walk. She had taken breaks before the office and everything else blew up all at once, but this was a different sort of thing; walks were less about the destination than they were about the going. She'd notice ads for the business taped up on walls she'd visited and billboards she'd handpicked, places she'd been but couldn't really experience even in passing because those endeavors fell under the umbrella of work; and she'd pretend not to notice, because if she were to let Ms. Velázquez take over for even a second, whole other sections of her brain would spin up some observation or detailed analysis on how the kerning on the font used or the quantity and quality of lighting in the picture of her or which direction she had chosen to cross her legs. The presence of such an analysis would serve only to irk her, and all the seconds spent responding to their presence would be

wasted. Every trip she took she'd memorize the locations of these ads and consciously or not would generate a path to follow for that week's stroll which would elude her of having to even see the thing.

This would get harder to do week after week as she spent more and more of the advertising budget pressing her name and face into almost every corner and alleyway which would fit it, seemingly working for herself by working against herself. Theoretically she could go anywhere on her Sunday walk; in reality she had cornered herself in. Just like that, gone were the expressive improvisations in directions, hollowed out by a morose, paranoid tedium of her own doing.

On lunch breaks at work she would skip eating to mark out potential routes to take based on a database of known advertisement locations. Ms. Velázquez didn't mind missing a meal; it would help with the figure. Each Sunday she'd test two or three candidates based on their neighborhood grouping and take copious notes on her phone on the pros and cons contained within each. She'd take a cab to the starting point and work from there. If a route absolutely had to contain an ad for the business, that was probably fine, but no more than one; otherwise what exactly was the point of all this?

She had narrowed it down to one path she could reliably take. If she wore sunglasses and a hoodie, she'd be pretty inconspicuous, having likely become something of a local celebrity to Philadelphia; though more data were necessary. First she'd hail a cab down and take it to [BLANK]. She'd get out and walk two blocks to the coffee shop where she'd initiate the transaction for one of three menu items in rotation: a medium hot coffee with two creams and four Splenda packets, a small mocha frappuccino, or a large dark; each time she'd accompany

the beverage roulette with a chocolate-filled croissant, warmed up in the microwave for about ten seconds. Two sips of the drink would be downed while waiting for the associate handling baked goods to get the croissant and warm it up. She'd leave the shop and head right through the outdoor tables for four blocks. Right, one block. Left, two blocks. Left again, three blocks; first ad passed, signage on the side of a local soft pretzel food truck. Turn around, one block then left for three blocks. There was no way for her to get back to where she started without running into a second ad, a banner which runs along the top section of some metal fencing in front of a patch of unfinished construction work. To mix it up, she could take a right instead of a left at the third turn for four blocks and double back around, and if she were in need of a longer walk she'd just do whichever she picked a second time; either way she'd catch a ride back home. She would spend the rest of the day scrolling through her social media feeds, faster vertical swipes any time she noticed a post from an entity she wasn't following with knowledge that it was promoted; worth it to extend outreach onto the socials? There'd be another time for that.

With the route set in stone, all she had to do now was stick to it, something that used to be rather difficult for her, attention spans being what they are, but free time as a commodity had forcibly put her in this position and she would just stick to it by necessity. Until her route betrayed her.

On a Sunday in late October, just before Halloween, she went through all the usual motions she always did: the shades, the hoodie, the cab, route A today. But something was different that day; it was that María caught herself noticing things on this route in a way which she hadn't in quite some time. How long have those leaves been this green? Was there always a tree there? Did they just open that hair salon last week?

It was the ads that clued her in. María on multiple instances while lost on a train of thought to nowhere but the coming week's stresses caught herself noticing ads for the business; then she'd write it off as flicks of the imagination gone wild. But after four or so of these alerts she could ignore them no longer. Perturbed, she turned around and reversed her route, her head jerking every which way and that like a broken fan, pacing erratically. Frantically, she read every single advertisement, so nervous that she'd almost forgotten what her own face looked like for a moment. Her paranoia would send her down the wrong boulevards and avenues, ones where Ms. Velázquez knew specific locations of each and every business her presence effaced by the nearest latitudinal and longitudinal set of coordinates, from illustrated A4's on notice boards near local breweries for the millennial crowd to underneath overpasses with hanging billboards. She'd stumble around aimlessly for hours, catching a glimpse of herself in all the way self-aggrandizing propaganda out of her peripheral vision. Each time she blinked she tried to stretch it out for unnatural lengths of time just so she could for even the briefest of moments be in the place where she couldn't see all those unknowns versions of herself. Passing by a convenience store, she overheard two strangers waiting in line at a video rental kiosk, gossiping about all these hot new Island therapy upstarts and trading stories about their experiences; she snatched her earbuds out from her pocket and hit play on an easy listening Spotify playlist, ignoring her phone's pop-up warning to crank the volume. She landed at a park bench, piano sonatas blaring and elevator jazz singers crooning. María just stared at her feet blankly.

Humans weren't meant to be sold to; this she knew. But perhaps the idea of the walk had been as an escape from the self, impossible when María's face were plastered all over. Whatever the case, these excursions could no longer last; she and Ms. Velázquez would see to that. She stood

up off the bench, not having noticed an image of her face having been positioned just adjacent to her posterior for the entirety of her removed leisure, and threw a single knapsack strap over her leftmost shoulder. There was no escape. She tapped a few minimalist buttons on her new iPhone to summon a Lyft. She got today's second coffee from Dunkin and had the staff put together all the fixings for the sake of time. The Lyft showed up four minutes later than schedule, the expatriate driver not too familiar with the city; she settled herself into the front seat as rebuke. María and Ms. Velázquez got into a shouting match over what to order for supper; the driver lowered his 90's hip hop playlist and drove in silence, eyes darting over every now and then. They both wished he'd just stick to the road.

Chapter 22 - Halloween Party

“So what do you do?”

“Well, it's pretty complicated...”

“Hija, come over and meet Germain’s uncle, Mr.-*Professor* Richards. He wants to say hi and talk to you.”

“No, it’s fine, I’ll catch you again!”

“Wait, I, alright, no, it’s cool. Um, hi! It’s nice to meet you, Mister, what was it...?”

“Hello, yes, Richards, it was, yes. I’m a professor over at UMD, teaching anthropology and researching the effects of the war on drugs on indigenous peoples of the Ozarks.”

“Oh, really, do you live in Miami or do you commute in?”

“Ah, well, actually, that’s not-”

“Pardon me, miss and sir! I’m not interrupting anything, am I?”

“Oh, absolutely not, in fact, we’d only just started! I must say, I’m greatly enjoying the costume!”

“Oh, this thing? Nah. Last minute.”

“Far from it! Miss, pardon me, it was....?”

“No it’s fine! Ms. Velázquez, Ms. María Velázquez. A pleasure to meet you as well, mister...?”

“My manners, where are they!? The name’s Gonzalo Cortez. I’m making myself busy overseeing the new housing project over on [INSERT NEIGHBORHOOD NAME HERE]. You know, subdivision partitioning, throwing groundbreaking ceremonies, social media outreach, and all that. Budget’s low this year so I’ve taken it all on! Lots of hats. My first break in weeks!”

“I see, that’s quite a feat.”

“Very interesting, indeed.”

“And again, my manners! The guest of honor is no one other than yourself, miss...agh, my memory’s not what it used to be...”

“María is just fine. You can say it like, ‘muh-ree-uh’ so it’s easy.”

“I’ve seen all your ads during my stay. Incredible! It’s so simple. I just had to meet you. That’s why I was so rude in interrupting you. I mean, why didn’t I think of it!”

“Well, it’s nothing, really...”

“You know, you remind me of some of my best students. They’re all so smart yet so...unwilling to accept their talents for what they are. What you’ve done, what you’re doing, no one else could have done.”

“Nobody else. None.”

“Zero. Absolutely nobody else has your abilities. I’ve heard stories, you know!”

“I’m just trying my best, just like everybody else.”

“A fine way to live. And the stories I’ve heard! From all sorts, really. I think one of those people is actually here now, as a matter of fact...”

“Oh...is that so. How curious.”

“Let me go fetch her. She’s very nice, I’m sure the two of you will get along...”

“You know, this drink does wonders.”

“Oh, what is it, exactly?”

“Pendennis. Have you had it before?”

“No, I don’t think I have. What’s it taste like?”

“It’s a cocktail. Fruity, kind of hard to explain. Todos saben lo mismo, ¿sabes?”

“Oh, sé lo que quieres decir ahora. Gin and tonic for me.”

“Bah. I’ll get a rum and Coke next. Looks like you’re running on empty, want anything?”

“Mmm. I’m good actually.”

“¿Estás seguro?”

“Mmm. Thank you.”

“Right, I’ll be back.”

[DEADHEDRED38] where r u

[DEADHEDRED38] yo this party is little!!!!

[DEADHEDRED38] >:(

[DEADHEDRED38] it sux lol

[shesellsbeesgills] I mean it’s your party so...

“Walked into the wrong room...”

“Hey again! What do you mean walked into the wrong room?”

“Uh, I, just, you know. People doing their thing kinda thing...if that makes any sense whatsoever.”

“Ah. Yeah, some people never really break out of the freshmen year in college thing. Are you enjoying the party other than that?”

“Oh yeah, for sure! Everyone’s having a good time, which is pretty much you’d want out of this sort of thing. You?”

“Yeah, I guess. It’s kind of my sister’s, kind of her boyfriend’s thing. I guess he does this every year? I don’t really know. They had one last year, too, so.”

“Mmm. How do you know the host?”

“...He’s my sister’s boyfriend.”

“Oh, gotcha, that makes sense.”

“You?”

[DEADHEDRED38] lol i hate this. who's that guy?

“Kind of a friend of a friend of an acquaintance. I don't really know anybody here, actually. I think I got invited because we're Facebook friends. But that's fine by me, it being Saturday night, you know?”

“Oh totally, yeah I'm kind of a fresh face myself aside from the family part. I didn't really wanna go, but family's just such a big thing in the culture, and it's like such just a big disrespect if you're kind of the outlier.”

“So are you the outlier?”

“I think my mom was hoping I'd inherit the family business. My aunts and uncles are all wheat farmers back home so I probably could have gotten easily acquainted that way.”

“Oh wow, that's really fascinating stuff.”

“I guess. I mean, it's just natural they would want that from me.”

“Is that what you want?”

“What?”

“Are you going to do that, I mean?”

“I—no, I have something else going on right now, actually.”

“What's that?”

[shesellsbeesgills] SAVE ME

“Sorry, what did you say?”

“You mentioned something about having something else going on right now. I was just curious

“You don't...you know, I started this business and it's, you know, it's happening for me.”

“Oh, wow, fascinating! What's the business?”

“Mind if I drop back in?”

“Don’t mind if I butt in, y’all!”

“Oh no, please do! And your names are...?”

“Daniel.”

“The name’s Daniella, capeesh? And don’t get it twisted!”

“I...noted! Muh-ree-uh and I were just talking about life and all that good jazz.”

“Oh, life! You know, that’s so interesting. So what do you two do?”

“Oh, it’s nothing special. I’m an assistant manager at a Pepsi plant out in nearby Allentown. Just here on business, helping out here in the one on Roosevelt. I’m a replacement. Poor guy. Cancer. Of the lung. And now I’ve heard spread to his salival gland! His salivary gland, I mean! Can you imagine such a thing?”

“That’s terrible.”

“Oh my God, that’s so sad.”

“I know it! So I’m just helping out. You know how it is, with cancer and stuff.”

“I see. That’s...that’s very noble of you.”

“Oh, well, you know...”

“María! This one’s hard to find. You remember María, Ms. Gray?”

“Oh, hello there.”

“Danielle!”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, no, sorry, that’s Danielle. I...I’m surprised to see you here. I didn’t know you were living in town now.”

[DEADHEDRED38] this is my boyfriend's apartment

"Yeah, I moved. I was curious what it's like living here. I liked it the last couple times I was here, so."

"Ah, well. How'd you get into this party?"

[DEADHEDRED38] this is my boyfriend's apartment

"Prof. Richards is an old professor of mine! He invited me out here. Isn't that something?"

"That's...huh. Well, I'm glad you made it out to Philly okay."

"Yeah, it's good. I've got a pretty good job researching enzymes and other scientific stuff, so you know, I can't really complain at this point."

"That's...that's great!"

"Incredible!"

"She is superb. What a wonderful meeting this is."

"Yes, I agree."

"Indeed."

"Fantastic, really."

"Yes, I actually used to teach the physical sciences before I sort of...well, it's not worth discussing. Suffice to say now I suppose I'm just following my new calling in life. In anthropology and the social sciences."

"Ah...well, so, I'm just here on business. My father is here somewhere, actually. I think you'd really like to meet him. He owns and operates six different plants and knows a lot of people. Let me go get him real quick..."

"Oh, that would...that would be very nice, thanks."

“Would you excuse me, actually...”

“Please.”

“I’m actually gonna go get a drink myself, you guys want anything?”

“I’m fine.”

“Could you find me a PBR? They should be in the cooler on the floor over the refreshments table.”

“Oh sure thing, be right back...”

“Thanks!”

The two sisters stand alone. María’s hands grasp each other behind her back. Daniella nods her head to the reggaeton tune.

“Lots of people here, hmm?”

“Yep. You sure outdid yourself this time.”

“Wanna know a secret?”

“Not really.”

“Discord.”

[DEADHEDRED38] i didn’t do shit lmfao

“Naturally.”

“Should we do that Hispanic thing where we randomly switch back and forth between English and Espanol?”

“N-no? I mean, not really. Would rather stick to one, honestly, plus, like, read the room...”

“No...”

[DEADHEDRED38] fun

“Mama, how much longer must I endure this nonsense?”

“Your sister put on a lovely party! Be ashamed you didn’t help! Stay till two hours after it’s done and help clean up.”

“So, what, like five in the morning, then?”

“Better slow down on the drinks, then, hija.”

“Here’s that PBR you wanted!”

“Ay dios mio.”

“Oh, I think I know that one...it, uh...”

“Never mind her, she’s stupid. Thank you, uh...I’m sorry, I never got your name.”

“It’s Bartholomew, believe it or not. But most people just call me by my middle name, Daniel.”

“Daniel it is, then! Thanks Daniel.”

“No worries. Gin and tonic for me.”

“Huh.”

“A copy of a copy of a copy. See y’all.”

“Sorry, I’d kick her out but this is kind of her party.”

“Ha, it’s no worries. I’ve got two brothers, so I know what that sort of thing can be like.”

“They from around here?”

“Negative. Arkansas, actually. As a matter of fact, one of them’s getting marrie-”

“That’s her, pops!”

“You looked prettier in the pictures! Just joshin’. Name’s Stevenson, Bradley Stevenson, or Bradley Steveys for short. That’s what the folks in the know call me. Now, if you’re *really* in the know, well, that’s some whole other things goin’ on. In due time, miss...?”

“Maria is fine, sir. A pleasure”

“Dad, manners...”

“It’s nice to meet you. Your son said you were looking forward to meeting me.”

“Looking forward? Good God, that’s one hell of an understatement. You’re a bonafide superstar around these parts! And I should know. I’ve actually got seven Pepsi-Co bottling operations, owned and operated by *moi*, yours truly, Mr. Bradley Steveys. Yep, yessir, they all work for me, but I’ve gotta work for them.”

Daniel: “I think I work nearby one of your plants.”

“I’d put down a few thousand per on that bet, young man. Pepsi and Pepsi products are everywhere, young man, and we’re only growing. And in you, young lady, I see only further opportunity to grow. And so I do come to you with something of an idea, a proposition, if you will.”

“Is now really the time, father?”

“Never better! I’m not even drunk yet! Watch yourself, though, a few more and maybe I’ll be ringing up ICE on this place! Bahahaha, that one’s low even for me. I kid in jest, miss. For I am but a gentleman in heart, body, and mind who approaches you with a vision of the future, one in which you, Miss Maria, are the queen of a universe. How, you ask?”

[DEADHEDRED38] yo what da fuck did he just say

“I’m listening.”

[DEADHEDRED38] Bitch!!!!

“Maybe that’s one too many mimosas, father...”

“Nonsense! Matter fact, go fetch us all some. Whatcha think they call it bottomless for? And if they ain’t got any left, then fish out your credit card and head down to the liquor store because tonight is about to be what you might call a celebration of sorts, sirs and madams. What I’m proposing is a colliding of worlds of sorts. A new world, or should I say a new world order, with your face, Miss Maria, as the signifier of change. Something like enlightenment, if you believe in that sort of thing. It’s simple: merge the old with the new. Competition with Coca-Cola-none of you have rum and Cokes, right?”

“No.”

“No.”

“Right, then. What I was saying was: the competition is fierce and the markets are all changing. We need to adapt accordingly. But us old guys at the top of the food chain ain’t so good at coming up with fresh new ideas. So I’m sure you can imagine our initial excitement, to be followed by subsequent disappointment, when the Island showed up. Had us all shittin’ bricks. And yet no one’s really been able to capitalize in a big way yet. Think about it. All these corporate conglomerates with only a dollar on the mind yet no big ideas! This one’s bigger than the internet, but think about how slow us dinosaurs were to adapt to that. Created by humanity, yet it took the world’s brightest years to turn a profit. And so we’re already at a disadvantage with what I do believe is something of a force of nature. So what do we do then? Now, I know what you’re thinking: nuke the thing and sponsor VIP seating, or throw our logo on the warhead and get a few cameras in there for style shots. Problem is, we ain’t a defense contractor. Folks are s’posed to enjoy drinking our product, not think about the ives of warfare and all that. So then

we thought, well, just buy the Island. But for a company like us the margins just don't work in our favor."

"So what then, Mr. Stevenson?"

"Young man, I am so very glad you asked. It's simple: we look outward. Think about it: thank you Freddie. Cheers, everyone!"

"Cheers."

"Cheers."

"I thought you weren't drinking?"

"So anyways; you think about it, you go: where are people at their most themselves? 'Cause it ain't at a public place that some folks are still concerned is all one big government conspiracy, which I can tell you as a stock-hounding venture capitalist with years of lobbying experience: it ain't. And the numbers show they ain't as willin' these days to break out their credit cards on the real big picture stuff outside the comfort of their own homes. Media. It's media, don'tcha see? Media is the television and media is the internet. It's your tailored music playlists and the ads you scroll through butcha still see. You see, you and I, Miss Maria, both know this, in fact. Truth is, I've all seen your ads. We've seen all your ads. Tasteful stuff. Tasteful, but how the marketing arm might call, "Lacking in a globalized sense." Right hand to God, on behalf of not only seven fine bottling plant establishments throughout the great states of Philadelphia and New Jersey but all of the fine folks at PepsiCo, I do aim to give you that sense, stripped down to its very core. Miss Maria, I'd like to help you if you'll so much as indulge me the honor of a signature, binding you only to a single non-disclosure agreement so we can discuss these matters of what your

future could look like freely and openly. In layman's terms, I'm asking for your word in secrecy."

"Another drink, then?"

"That would be good, yes."

"So what do you say, then?"

"I'm gonna go fix something up for myself, actually..."

"Heyo, back again."

"I—I don't really know what to say. You haven't really told me much."

"I just got back."

"Maybe if I said it back in ess-paniel! Ha! Again, I'm teasin'. Look, you're a woman of business. I've seen these imitators. They're snakes. They're out to get you. They're out to get all of us. They'll sneak up behind you when you least expect it and BAM! Wretch you from your place of comfort, of safety. Or maybe it's more like a vulture, preying on unsuspecting vermin in the desert. High up above where they can see everything but you can't see them. They don't want you to see them. They don't wanna be touched by you people. But look at me, Miss Maria. I'm right here. I'm talkin' and drinkin' and havin' a good time, just like all the common folks is. I can't be mistaken for one of these plutocrats. They know where to look. And I'm just one person, one cog in the machine. I ain't like you, I didn't start no business of mine in these 59 years on God's green earth. So I've gotta hide my wares where they can't get to 'em. Where only I can find 'em, and where the people I trust can know where to look. And my wares is my thoughts, my knowledges, not just intellectual property but *intellectual property*. It's a kleptocracy, and

people like you and me are the marks. And they'll swallow us up whole, make us part of their scheme. We're both bait and tackle, plain and simple. Insurgents in this guerrilla warfare."

[DEADHEDRED38] oh dip we on candid camera!!!!

"I...I'm sorry, I think I'll just need some time to think things through. Surely you'll understand Mr. Stevenson. I'm still not sure what's being asked of me, if I'm being honest. But you seem to know some things."

"Too much. That's the problem."

"And speaking of too much, I think perhaps you've had one or two too many mimosas for your own good, father. Thank you all for your hospitality, I'll be driving him back to his hotel."

"I could call a cab."

"I could drive you, Mr. Stevenson."

"No, no, that's quite fine. Much thanks again."

"And one more thing...my card. It's all there. Too much. Keep it safe. Y'all come back now..."

"...ya hear? Godspeed cowboy man."

"That...sure was a lot, huh?"

"Yes, Daniel, it was a lot."

"Was his theme, 'Super Racist Dude That's Good At Making People Not Notice All His Weird Racist Behavior?' Because if so, mad respect for the time and effort put in."

"Ay, now that the gringos left, realmente comencemos esta fiesta!"

"Damn straight, y'all."

"Hija, do you know what happened to all the mimosas? I was saving some for Mr. Richards. Isn't he so handsome?"

“I didn’t really notice, mama.”

“Yikes, it’s getting pretty late. Um, maybe I’ll see you again?”

“Um, yeah, maybe.”

“I’m...not sure if I have your numb-”

“Just give me your phone.”

She’d had a few, hopefully she put it in right.

[DEADHEDRED38] he is pretty cute tbh

[afxfn4.82454201] pics?

Chapter 23 - Race Relations

“I hope you know it’s nothing personal.”

“It’s okay, I understand. You have to do what’s best for you and yours.”

“I-thank you. I really had a good time. It was a learning experience.”

“For both of us, Georgia. If nothing else.”

And with that, Georgia Camacho-Almodóvar was gone, having procured an assistant manager position at a local neighborhood-style Walmart; María thought of it something of a downgrade, as to her Georgia had a ground floor-level position into something which she thought could be really big if they could just stick with it, but sometimes there’s just no helping these kids. She put out a job offer to fill his seat, figuring she’d up the pay for the next person to fill Georgia’s spot and instantly received a cavalcade of applicants all vying to work with her, most of which weren’t all that enticing; some of the cover letters she received read more like fan mail than professional documents, and most didn’t even have their GED’s. Unlike with Georgia, who she’d more or less hired on the spot out of desperation, the onboarding process this time around went a bit slower than she would have hoped it would. There were people with experience from manifold different fields, from retired therapists looking to occupy the rest of their days with a part-time job (this was full-time), to clerks wanting to get in on the ground floor of something big (María respected their ambition, but none of them seemed quite right; in that they all seemed to be maladroit clones of one another), to a housemaid just looking for a change in life (María

could empathize with her plight but with the pen hits the paper, would this one be ready?). She would settle on a man named Joseph Morgan, a former plumber who had something of a change of heart when while on the job a pipe ruptured due to high water pressure and all manners of toilet gunk and human detritus splattered all over his face, clothes, arms, and legs. He went back to school and got his associate's, waiting at a cafe for senior citizens on the side to make ends meet, which as far as María was concerned was more qualification than these other applicants could muster; this was, after all, nothing more than an administrative office gig. At the end of the day, probably not worth getting all uppity about.

There were more pressing matters that needed attending to, she thought. Business inquiries needed replying to; potential branding deals, opportunities for expansion, and the like. These usually didn't hold much sway for her; in reality most were spam, so much so that one could never really tell what brought with it a splintered shard of authenticity. And then there were appointments; there were always twenty or so appointments, each and every day of the work week. And she dreaded every single one of them. She'd begun to see her clients less so as people and more as obstacles to be overcome. They'd enter, one at a time, sometimes optimistic and bubbly, sometimes morose and forlorn, through the mahogany six-paneled door to her private office space. They'd notice the photographs of her family, the filing cabinets open to reveal important-seeming official documentation, the papers strewn about, pencils and pens pointing this way and that, María sitting there in the chevroned Bergère furiously typing something which surely required her utmost attention; they'd hear the clattering of keystrokes, the hum of the A/C ventilation, the staccato rhythm of the old-fashioned cloth hung on the wall providing structure and order, but mostly comfort; they'd take in all this unknowably arcane knowledge housed just

so in the dioramic tableaux that was her quaint little office space and think, wow, now there's a woman who's got it all figured out.

And they would be right, though not for the right reasons. Work for her was nothing more than mere performance. Cold, hard execution; very routine and very rote, a series of rehearsed responses, both verbal and facial, automatically queried in response to a corresponding stimulus brought upon by the client's choice of input. This was process as scientific engineering, and she'd had it down pat. It would happen seemingly without thoughtfulness or presentness.

Throughout these meetings, she'd find herself someplace else entirely. Try as she might, she could never bring herself to be able to look their faces, to be there with their confusion, their euphoria, their pain. She could never manage to see past herself.

The main thrust of her occupation had for her then became the most dreadful.

That subinbox she'd set up as a quarantined hopper for any and all correspondence containing curse words, ethnic slurs, or derogatory gendered terms? Everything in there needed to be deleted, pronto. But first, it would all need to be read, because you just never know when one might contain some morsel of truth. It was these little nuggets of insight that kept María going through all the drudge work and monotony; the thought that somehow, someday, if she could wade her way through the dregs of the day then maybe, just maybe, she could derive something useful from the experience.

She titled this subinbox, "The Subsurface Smoldering Event," a phenomena she'd read about in an article, a moniker denoting the burning fires existing beneath the Earth's crust as a result of landfill burning which have a way of releasing toxic and often cancerous pathogens out into the airwaves. She'd thought herself mighty clever when having thought of this. Funnily enough, the

tab for this inbox found on the left side of her email client was not nearly big enough to fit this title in, so all one could read unless they expanded it rightward was, “The Subs...” which still felt appropriately condescending.

Out of spite, María was always keen to attempt to track down the sender. This desire had led her to formulate a series of countermeasures which would nab her a name and general location of the person who deigned to send hate mail her way. But given the ease with which one could parade themselves around anonymously on the Internet, in reality she could only do anything about the sloppier offenders. It all depended on their email handle. If the offender were so foolish to make their identity known via the usage of an email address which contained their own name, that gave her an entry point. Not enough information to litigate a perpetrator with, but a solid start nonetheless. If the email were in a non-English language, she'd use Google Translate to try and get a general idea of what they had to say. In either case, the first thing she would do would be to take to Facebook and perform a search on the email address, which more often than not would return nothing. If the address had a first and last name, she'd run a trace on the email using an online header analyzer tool, and if it returned a city, that was great. If it returned a proprietary IP address (i.e., one not from Google or the like) or the latitudinal and longitudinal coordinates, still good, because then she could at least get a handle on the city which the email had been sent from. If this were successful she'd take to Facebook and perform an advanced search of the perpetrator's first and last name together with the city (country-appropriate) they were from. If she were very lucky she'd get only a single search result returned, but usually she'd see more than one. At that point, it was time to start making sweeping generalizations about their character based on posts and the nature of their photos and videos viewable to the public. These were

almost always men; women, she thought, know what it's like to be on the receiving end of online harassment and thus wouldn't stoop so low as to perpetuate that kind of behavior. The sort of man who would send a rude or threatening email was overly prideful and loves to show off, so anybody that had listed their job description as either president CEO or the marketing director of a start-up was a potential candidate. If they had a shirtless bathroom mirror or gym selfie as their profile picture, that too would put them on the shortlist; and if they had both, well, that was a dead giveaway. Hard-boiled liberals were usually off the table, barring some exceptions; usually these people were either die-hard conservatives or timid centrists, borderline neo-cons, the type to shake across the aisle at the dinner table to save face. If they shared a lot of memes geared toward baby boomers or quiz results, add them to the list. Given the current climate of people who still in 2019 regularly use Facebook, she was almost never able to narrow a name down to a single candidate; so on her dossier she'd catalogued the URL's of each and every Facebook account which fit the bill, or sometimes their Twitter or Instagram handles if she were feeling particularly bored that given Sunday. She never did anything with this information. It was satisfying enough for her to know.

Content-wise, the emails that ended up in the 'Subsurface Smoldering Event' hopper were pretty standard fare. If María were to perform a search of the word 'cunt' throughout the entirety of the sub-400 count hopper, she'd be able to return almost 2000 instances; nearly five times the amount of emails in there. This was jealousy brought upon by misogyny, plain and simple. Many were completely unintelligible, their intents clear but their reasoning muddled and lackluster. Disappointing, she thought. Nothing of merit to derive from such drivel. Sometimes they contained stupid memes oriented toward conservatives.