

# Beside Myself

*a novel*

Jeff Gomez

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For Zachery,  
a future reader

“From the very start there is no innocence and no singleness. Every created thing, even the simplest, is already guilty, already multiple.”

—Herman Hesse

SINCE THIS NOVEL features three different narrators and all of the events happen at the same time, the chapters within each section can be read in any order. For example, the three chapters of section one—each of which pertain to a different narrator—start on pages 8, 38, and 64. However, feel free to read these chapters out of sequence. Start on page 64, then go to page 38, and finally flip back to page 8. The same applies to the three passages of section two that begin on pages 104, 126, and 150, as well as the chapters of section three starting on pages 187, 209, and 232.

In between each of the three main sections are short chapters that should be read before moving on to the next section. These passages correspond as follows: the chapter beginning on page 94 should be read after completing all of the material in section one. The chapter beginning on page 178 should be read after completing all of the material in section two. The chapter beginning on page 255 should be read after completing all of the material in section three.

The reader also may construct from everything that follows a novel of his or her

own by focusing on only one narrator's story at a time (or else reading only one or two versions of events and walking away). For instance, to follow only the first narrator you would read the sections beginning on pages 8, 94, 150, 178, 209, and 255. Alternatively, to read only the second narrator's story you would pick the passages beginning on pages 38, 94, 104, 178, 232, and 255. And for the third narrator you would read just the material beginning on pages 64, 94, 126, 178, 187, and 255.

Of course, if you prefer, you also can read the novel straight through from beginning to end.

The choice is yours.

# 1. Discovery

I WAS WALKING down Seventy-third Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when I saw myself come out of a brownstone on the opposite side of the street. Shocked by the sight of myself I froze, halting in mid-step. The version of me on the stoop was oblivious; he hadn't seen me. He was wearing running clothes and sneakers and was performing various stretches. After a minute or so he started walking east, toward Central Park, and I—stunned but intrigued—followed at a discreet distance.

The sidewalk was filled with people coming home from work or heading out to dinner, walking their dogs or taking their children out for a ride in expensive strollers. Cars—taxis, mostly, headed west down the one-way street—obscured the view of myself heading toward the park. But then, through a gap in the traffic, I could see that the running outfit the other version of me was wearing was one that I owned: grey Adidas shorts with red striping, light blue T-shirt, black digital watch. Only the shoes, which were Nike and looked new, were something that I didn't have back at my apartment in Hoboken, New



Jersey. This made me think that this was truly, somehow, me that I was seeing (instead of someone who just looked an awful lot like me).

Toward the end of the block I watched as the other Jeff leaned over to read the menu of a restaurant—a place called Arte Café—before peeking into the window of a tanning salon. At the corner, as he waited to cross Columbus, I felt more exposed than I did on Seventy-third Street, so I hung back and pretended to window-shop at an expensive boutique. Next to me a homeless guy was retrieving bottles from a line of trash cans standing outside an apartment building. He was filling up two plastic bags; each contained a mixture of plastic and glass bottles. The glass ones, as they knocked into each other inside the bag, made music not unlike wind chimes. In the reflection of the window, I could see the Jeff dressed in running clothes stepping farther and farther away from the curb.

The light finally changed and I watched as the other me started to lightly jog across the street. I followed and then, halfway down the next block—feeling a bit bold—crossed the street from the north to the south side. I was then only about twenty or twenty-five feet behind him. Directly ahead of me seemed to be me. People passed us, but no one appeared to notice that there were two versions of the same person on the sidewalk (one wearing running gear while the other was dressed for the office wearing khaki chinos, blue-checked shirt, brown loafers, with a brown Jack Spade messenger bag slung over his chest). Or maybe people did notice but figured, *Hey, this is New York. You can have as many versions of yourself as you want.*

Ahead of me the other Jeff continued to stretch as he walked down the street, getting loose by twisting his neck around in hard circles and swinging his arms from side to side. I could tell that his hair was a bit shorter than mine but it was cut in the same style.

From that angle I could see more clearly than ever my bald spot; receding in the front, I could now see that my hair was also disappearing from the back.

When I was in junior high and a science teacher was telling the class about the solar system and its various planets, he dispatched a fact about Venus that I've kept in my head ever since. He said that there was something about the planet's structure or its atmosphere—the facts now escape me, but the image remains—and that if you were walking on the surface, because of the way that light was bent, you would be able to see yourself walking in front of you. That idea always intrigued me: the footsteps you followed in the sand were your own. That's how I felt that early evening on Seventy-third Street as I was on my way to see my therapist. Except the version of myself that I could see walking in front of me was wearing different clothes, and seemed to be following his own path.

As I reached the corner of Seventy-third and Central Park West, the Jeff in running clothes caught the light and jogged across the street, heading south towards the entrance to the park. Glancing at my digital watch I noticed that it was, for some reason, flashing twelve o'clock. I pulled out my iPhone and saw that it was 7:06. My appointment with Dr. Schwartz was for 7:10. I was torn. I wanted to follow the other Jeff into the park although, given the running outfit, it was pretty clear what he was going to do. But while no one had noticed when we were both walking down Seventy-third, it would be a different story if I were running through Central Park in my work clothes just a few feet behind a person who looked exactly like me. Confronting the other Jeff also didn't seem to be an option since I couldn't be truly sure that it was indeed *me*. I didn't want to risk being seen as a madman or getting punched by a stranger. Then I noticed that my hand holding the iPhone was shaking. Talking to my therapist seemed like the better idea. So instead of giving chase, I stood on the

corner of Seventy-third Street on the Upper West Side of Manhattan and watched as a different Jeff Gomez turned left and disappeared into Central Park.

I backtracked, heading towards Dr. Schwartz's office on the corner of Seventy-fourth and Columbus. As I walked—quickly, so I wouldn't be late—I ran through my mind what had just happened. It didn't make sense to think that I just saw myself coming out of a brownstone. Then again, what was the other possibility? That I saw someone who *looked* an awful lot like me? As far-fetched as that was, it seemed reasonable enough. It's said that everyone possesses a double of himself somewhere in the world, a doppelganger who could convince even their closest friends that they're looking at the real thing. And yet while that was somewhat plausible (it was certainly more plausible than there being two versions of me), how would that explain the clothes? The shorts and shirt, exact duplicates of which I had—at that moment—in a dresser in my apartment across the river in New Jersey. And what could explain the mannerisms? The way he walked, the stretches he was doing. Whenever I go for a jog, those moves and that routine is the regimen I follow. How could someone who merely *looked* like me also *act* like me?

Turning up Columbus from Seventy-third, I could see the streets stretching almost to Harlem. Twice in my life I'd lived in this neighborhood: when I was single in a studio apartment on Ninety-sixth Street and then with my wife, Grainne, in a duplex on Seventy-seventh when we were just dating. Each apartment was even in this same general vicinity. The combined amount of time in both was just over a decade: eight years in one, two in the other. The fact that I'd previously spent so much time in this neighborhood made me think

that the vision I'd just had of myself on the sidewalk was some kind of flashback, a repressed memory bubbling to the surface.

I hadn't been seeing Dr. Schwartz for long—just a couple of months; a handful of sessions—and before his appointments had brought me to my old neighborhood it'd been years since I'd been back. Tonight, as soon as I'd stepped off the 1 train at Seventy-second Street, I was instantly flooded with memories. Walking through Verdi Square caused my mind to race, remembering hundreds of days and nights when I'd similarly emerged from the same subway station. By the time I was halfway down Seventy-third Street, which is where I thought I saw the other Jeff, I was already lost in reverie. It couldn't have been too difficult a psychological leap for my mind to make: conjuring up a vision of myself heading out for a late-day after-work run, the way I used to do years ago.

*But that was no hallucination,* I thought as I approached Dr. Schwartz's building, a large pre-war with new windows but a crumbling chocolate-cement façade. *He was casting a shadow. People on the sidewalk moved out of their way to let him pass. Ghosts can walk through walls; they don't wait for streetlights.*

Dr. Schwartz buzzed me in. As I crossed through the double doors and entered first the foyer and then the lobby, I looked at my watch; it was still flashing twelve o'clock. I reached for the iPhone: 7:13. Just about on time.

In the elevator, on my way up to the fifth floor, I tried to calm down. My breathing was a bit heavy and a layer of sweat had broken out on my forehead. It was late September and an Indian summer was gripping the city. Fall was close but so far was refusing to arrive.

I decided not to tell Dr. Schwartz about what had just happened. There were enough problems in my life—I was, after all, seeing a therapist—and I preferred to discuss my real problems rather than phantom visions. Besides, I didn't he think he'd believe me. As I

knocked on the black door marked 52 and thought back over the last ten minutes, I really didn't believe it myself.

Leaving Dr. Schwartz's office an hour later, I was thinking about what we'd discussed, trying to process the scant bits of advice he'd offered. Walking down Columbus—like I always did after a session—I began to cut across Seventy-third to Central Park West, heading towards Seventy-second Street where I'd catch a C train to Times Square (from there taking a bus out of Port Authority to Hoboken). But when I reached the corner and looked west down Seventy-third, I remembered the experience from earlier: seeing myself on the stoop in jogging clothes. Rather than walking east I turned and headed in the opposite direction, toward the brownstone.

When I was directly across from it (a bit dilapidated, it stood apart from the others on the block), I stopped and leaned against a lamppost. The brownstone had four stories. Lights were on in the first- and third-floor apartments but I couldn't see much in either since there were blinds in the windows on the first floor and the angle was such that—looking up into the third floor—all I could see was the ceiling and the edges of furniture. The windows on the second and fourth floors were completely covered in closed drapes.

Suddenly, as I was standing on the street staring up at the building, the other Jeff walked into view and stood—for just a second—at the third-floor window. After a quick glance down Seventy-third, he retreated back into the apartment.

It was almost eight-thirty and it was finally getting dark; the sky had segued from dark blue to light purple. Streetlights were popping on. Shaking my head, I discounted what I'd seen. I decided that it was just my mind playing tricks on me. It'd been a long day, a hot

summer, and a bad year, and that combination was enough to wreak havoc on anyone's mind. *You don't know what you saw*. Still, just to be safe, I stood on the street for another ten minutes, hiding behind the lamppost in case the other Jeff came to the window again. But he didn't and, after jotting down the address of the brownstone in a moleskin journal I always kept in my messenger bag, I headed toward Seventy-second Street and the subway.

On the way home, as I traveled underground from New York to New Jersey, I tried to forget about Seventy-third Street. Whatever it was I saw, it couldn't have been what I thought it was. Instead of focusing on fantasy, I closed my eyes and concentrated on myself: the me who was riding the bus home to Hoboken.

I work in publishing and, years ago, was a writer myself. My first novel, *Our Noise*, was published in 1995 as a paperback original during that brief period when Generation X fiction was a semi-popular art form. I was twenty-five years old. The book became a bit of a cult hit and to this day I run into people who have read and liked it. My next book, *Geniuses of Crack*, came out in 1997. By that time I had moved to New York City. The second novel shared some characters with my first novel but, unfortunately, shared none of its success.

I met my wife, Grainne, online in 2003. She worked for a museum back then, way down in Tribeca, but now works for a public relations firm in Midtown. After a year of dating we moved in together, renting the place on Seventy-seventh Street. After a year of cohabitation I popped the question and, after being engaged for a year, we were married. Our relationship back then was wonderful: close, warm, loving. Grainne then told me she wanted to have a child; that's when the trouble started.

I wasn't sure it was what I wanted. We talked about it endlessly, debating the issue over and over—night after night for months—but I just couldn't make up my mind. Our first, second, and third wedding anniversaries have all gone by and the question still isn't

settled. I finally decided to just delay, hoping—as our forties rapidly approached—that time would settle the question for us. She knew what I was doing and occasionally protested, but other than threaten divorce (which she did from time to time) there wasn't much she could do. She became hurt and bitter and I became hard and cruel. The closeness and warmth and love we experienced early in our relationship were slowly replaced by distance and ice and hate. Some days, I didn't know how many days we had left.

As the bus turned right onto Washington, I wondered if I should tell Grainne about the incident on Seventy-third Street. I decided not to tell her for the same reason I didn't mention it to Dr. Schwartz: because I was still unsure about exactly what had happened.

I got off the bus at Tenth Street and walked toward Hudson. As I approached the building, I could see that our lights were on. Grainne was home. She was probably in the living room, sitting on the couch working on her laptop. A year ago, when we were either constantly fighting or else subjecting the other to the silent treatment, looking up at our apartment like that left me feeling raw. I used to hate coming home and would do anything and everything I could to avoid it. Drinks with friends, working late, going to the gym. As long as it kept me out of the apartment and stopped me from facing what my marriage and life had become, I did it. But that passed and eventually we both—more or less—got over our pain and regret.

As I walked up the marble steps and put my heavy key into the gold lock, it amazed me what I'd learned to live with. My life had turned out not at all how I'd planned or wanted, and yet there I was, living it. What else could I do?

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The next day went by in a blur. Work was crazy and Grainne stayed up late preparing a presentation for an important client. But as preoccupied as I was, I couldn't stop thinking about the brownstone near Dr. Schwartz's office. Was that really some other version of myself? Or if it was just a flashback, or a repressed memory from when I lived in the neighborhood, why did it seem so real?

By the time the weekend rolled around I decided to go into Manhattan, back to Seventy-third Street. It worked out well since one of Grainne's college roommates, Heather, was in town and they had plans to spend the entire day together (first brunch, then a matinee, and finally drinks).

Once I was in Manhattan I retraced my steps from earlier in the week, taking the 1 train to Seventy-second and walking north to Seventy-third. The block was deserted. Most people were away for the weekend, in either the Hamptons or Fire Island or wherever it was they had a timeshare or condo. The lingering heat felt like summer's last gasp, and everyone wanted to take advantage of it.

I found the brownstone I'd seen the other Jeff come out of and watched it for about fifteen minutes. No one entered or left. The window on the third floor was a blank; all I could see was furniture.

Across from the brownstone was a large building called the Wakefield. Unlike the modest pre-war three- and four-story brownstones lining the street, the Wakefield was a huge apartment building. It had seven stories and spanned a quarter of the block. A bright blue canvas awning supported by two brilliantly polished brass poles shaded the sidewalk in front of the building. *The Wakefield* was printed in italic script on flaps that hung from the awning, swaying gently in the warm breeze. A sign in the glass window—beyond which I could see a series of couches, a uniformed doorman, and a chandelier that had seen better



days—screamed APTS FOR RENT LUXORY THREE TWO ONE BEDROOMS AND STUDIO ALL AMMENTITIES INCL. I walked into the lobby and asked if I could see the manager.

“Can I tell him what this is regarding?” The doorman spoke in a thick Bronx accent. His uniform—with its wide lapels and huge epaulets—made him look like a third-world dictator.

“I’d like to see about renting an apartment.”

When the manager arrived—a small, wiry man with wispy gray hair and bifocals pushed onto his forehead—I told him that I was looking for a *pied-à-terre* for when I was in town on business a few times a month.

“Sure, sure,” he said, winking at me as he consulted a clipboard in his hand. His wink made me suspect he thought I was lying, which of course I was. “Come on, I’ll show you some units.”

In the elevator he explained that the Wakefield was built in the ‘30s but in the 1970s it became housing for low-income residents and seniors. The city had been trying to shut the building down for years, while dozens of developers had lined up to buy and refurbish it (performing minor renovations and then charging full market price for each of the 174 apartments). But the residents hired lawyers and partnered with various non-profit and advocacy groups in order to fight the city and the developers. The first two times the case was tried, the residents prevailed.

“However,” the manager said as he opened the door to a spacious one bedroom on the sixth floor, “the third time’s *always* the charm.”

As I walked into the apartment, I asked, “Where did everyone go who used to live here? The old people? The poor people?”

The manager just shrugged; it was clearly not his concern. He then proceeded to give me a tour of the apartment. It was nice but, going to the window, I could see that it was a few doors down from the brownstone I saw myself come out of earlier in the week. It was also too high for looking into the third floor apartment across the street. At that angle it'd be like standing on the sidewalk and looking up, except reversed: all I'd see is floor instead of ceiling. Still, I felt I had to go through the charade of looking at the apartment, appearing to consider it. After a few minutes of poking my nose into the various corners and asking the standard questions, I said, "This is too big for me. I probably only need a studio."

"Studio, sure," the manager said, again consulting the clipboard in his hand.

"And do you have one on the third or fourth floor?"

"Sure, sure," he repeated, leading me out of the apartment and locking the door behind us. We hopped back onto the elevator and he then showed me another unit. As soon as he opened the door, I could tell it was going to be perfect. The brownstone across the street completely filled the two windows overlooking Seventy-third. As I walked in circles throughout the studio, pretending to inspect the kitchen and then the bathroom, I kept peeking out the windows with the corner of my eye. There was a straight view into the third floor apartment of the brownstone.

"I'll take it."

The manager nodded, telling me the rent and moving-in costs. I just mumbled, "Fine, fine." No matter how much it was I would have paid it. He then handed me a half-dozen pieces of paper.

"Let's go downstairs. You'll need to fill these out and then I'll check your credit score and call your bank. I'll have to do that on Monday. If everything checks out, the place is yours."

We left the studio and then got back into the elevator, heading toward the ground floor.

“When can I move in?”

“If everything’s in order,” he said, pointing to the papers in my hand, “and your check clears, you can move in early next week.”

Back in the lobby, he pointed to a couple of couches and a coffee table located to the right of the plate-glass doors of the entrance.

“Take a seat, fill out these forms, and then give them to the doorman. I’ll call you with the news as soon as I have it.”

I sat down and found a pen in my back pocket. A few feet away the doorman introduced the manager to yet more people who were interested in apartments: a couple and two single guys. Ten minutes later I handed over my forms and then headed to Broadway. There was a Bed, Bath and Beyond near Lincoln Center and I wanted to buy a few essentials since I was going to be living for a while in the Wakefield.

On Monday the manager called my iPhone to tell me the apartment was mine. Grainne and I were sitting on the couch eating leftovers on TV trays while we watched an episode of *The Daily Show* from last week on our DVR. I told her the call was for work and ran to the bedroom.

“Super,” I whispered. “I’ll move in right away. I have meetings in New York all next week.”

“*Meetings,*” the manager repeated suspiciously. In the background I could hear two other phones ringing; the Wakefield must have been filling up fast. “At any rate, it’s here for

whatever you want to do with it. All you need to do is come in and see Jake. He'll have some papers for you to sign and then he'll give you the keys. Now, if you're coming in tomorrow he'll only be here until about eleven. After that—”

While the manager was talking, I looked around the room for something to write with. That's when I saw it. Grainne's notebook filled with charts and dates and times, the journal she used for keeping track of when she was ovulating so we would know when to sleep together (which we still did sometimes). I always knew the moment was getting close when she would start taking her temperature right after I got out of bed in the morning. As soon as she saw me stir and then climb out from under the covers, Grainne would mechanically reach for the digital thermometer on her nightstand. I'd then hear it *beep beep beep* as I walked down the hallway headed for the bathroom, an electronic pulse matching each step. What she was looking for was a pattern: a dip in temperature before ovulation and then a spike. Whenever that would happen we would follow the same course: our modest peak of happiness followed by fights and tears and the inevitable trough.

Even though I spotted the notebook, the thermometer wasn't yet on the nightstand. This meant it would be another week or so before we'd have that conversation. I had at least seven days before I'd have to avoid sex. I suddenly felt relieved, and then just as quickly felt like a fool. It amazed me how something I used to enjoy could become such a chore, something to be feared. Experience was like an hourglass; turn it upside down and everything moves in the opposite direction.

“You got that?” the manager was saying. He sounded very far away. “*Two* forms of ID.”

“I got it,” I said. “I'll be there tomorrow.”

“Great,” he said, and then hung up.

I walked back to the living room and joined Grainne on the couch. When I did she looked at me and half-smiled; a sad smile that I could tell was forced. The long bangs of her short black hair were held in place with two silver bobby pins forming an X. In between bites I told her that I would probably have to be out of town for the next couple of weeks on a business trip.

“I know, I should have told you earlier.” I tried desperately, for the second time that day, to sound like I was telling the truth. “But I guess I forgot. Plus, it was kind of a last minute thing.”

Grainne tried to seem interested, but I could tell she was thinking of something else. Heather had met her on Sunday with the news that she was (yet again) pregnant. This had sent Grainne into a depression she’d yet to come out of. On the couch she shrugged her shoulders and said, “Okay, but call while you’re gone. And remember, our anniversary’s next week.”

I’d forgotten about this; five years.

“I should be back by then,” I said. “We can go to Amanda’s. You like that place, right?”

As an answer she gave me the same fake half-smile. I was her husband and should have been comforting her, easing her pain like a pencil uses its eraser to scratch out mistakes. But I couldn’t. If I began to rub her back and tell her I loved her, it somehow would have led to another fight; the same one we’d been having for years. She wanted to start a family and I didn’t. We were stuck in a stalemate, locked in orbit around an argument that neither of us was going to win until one of us changed. And I just wasn’t sure I hadn’t in me, at thirty-nine years old, to change.

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The next day, after Grainne left for work, I called my office and left a voicemail saying that I was travelling and wouldn't be returning any calls. I also switched my email to an Out of Office message. I then packed up some clothes: jeans, T-shirts, socks, underwear. After throwing toiletries into my messenger bag, I wrote WILL CALL IN A FEW DAYS LOVE YOU on a Post-It and attached it to the bathroom mirror. On the bus on the way out of town I spotted Amanda's and made a reservation for our anniversary the following week.

When I arrived at the Wakefield I found Jake, showed him my license and passport, and then signed the lease and a few other forms. He told me about when to put out the garbage and how to handle recycling. He then handed over my keys. While I was waiting for the elevator, the doorman told me that Bed, Bath and Beyond had delivered a bunch of stuff earlier in the day. Jake had opened up the apartment and let them put all the stuff inside.

"Thanks," I said, slipping him a ten-dollar bill as he gave me the signed delivery receipt. "I appreciate it."

He nodded and then tipped his hat, as if to say *That's what I'm here for.*

Inside the apartment, after giving a quick look across the street to see if there was anything happening, I unpacked all the stuff I'd ordered the other day. Inflatable mattress, office chair, nightstand. In the kitchen I placed into the cupboard the assorted dishes that I'd bought on sale: dinner plate, bowl, bread plate, cup, and saucer. Into one of the kitchen drawers I placed the set of silverware I'd brought from home (I figured Grainne wouldn't notice they were gone). From my messenger bag I stocked the medicine cabinet in the bathroom with the usual supplies: toothbrush, toothpaste, shaving cream, razor. Finally, from the inner pocket of my messenger bag I pulled out my iPod and a pair of portable

speakers. I set the speakers next to the bed, plugged everything in, and then hit *shuffle*. I was all moved in and ready to start.

I began by taking up a position in the chair beside the window. Looking into the apartment across the street (which, helpfully, had the blinds up), I discovered that two of the windows exposed the living room while the other looked into the bedroom. In the bedroom, however, I couldn't see much: the edge of a bed that didn't look familiar (the comforter was white, covered in some kind of design, and the bed frame was modern and made of blond wood). I could also see a dresser made out of the same kind of wood as the bed. There were some random items on the dresser, but I couldn't tell what they were.

The living room was a different story. The TV, entertainment center, bookshelf, and two end tables—dark wood, from Room and Board—were exact replicas of what was currently sitting in my apartment in New Jersey. Even the TV, stereo, and DVD player were the same. Using a pair of opera glasses that I'd packed, I could see that the books on the shelves were ones that I owned.

There was also a couch and chair—both modern, beige—but those I didn't recognize. I couldn't decide whether this made sense or else made it even stranger. Would it be less weird if the living room were an exact copy of what was currently in my apartment across the river? Or did the subtle, random differences—along with the furniture in the bedroom, which didn't match anything I owned—mean that maybe this was all just some sort of strange coincidence? I'd collected that shelf of books over the years due to my various tastes and interests, so why couldn't someone else have the same collection?

This question kept me busy until I remembered that what was scaring me most wasn't the possessions, or even that the arrangement of the room was a near carbon copy of

my apartment in New Jersey. The most scary, and ridiculous, part of the situation was me. The *other* me. The Jeff Gomez that I was pretty sure lived in that apartment.

The light in the bedroom was the first thing I noticed: the window went from hazy gray to bright yellow. I then watched as a dress shirt and then a pair of slacks was thrown onto the bed. A dresser drawer was opened and I saw a body wearing just boxer shorts fish out from the drawer a green T-shirt and then a pair of faded jeans. The body then disappeared. A few seconds later the lights in the living room were turned on and he entered. I nearly fell off the chair. Across the street, through the window—in a third floor apartment in a brownstone I'd never been to before and hadn't seen until the other day—I saw myself sit down on a couch, reach for a silver remote control, and turn on the same flat-screen television that I had in my apartment in New Jersey.

For the next couple of hours nothing much happened. I watched the other Jeff watch the news, then some reruns. He disappeared for a while, presumably to the kitchen since he came back with spaghetti and meatballs along with a glass of red wine. For the next half-hour he ate his dinner while channel surfing. The channel seemed to change every couple of bites (behavior Grainne had complained about often). When he was done with dinner he turned off the TV, stretched out on the couch, and read for the rest of the night. He started with the latest issue of two magazines—*The Nation* and *The Economist*—before moving on to a book (I couldn't tell which since it was a hardback and the dust jacket was off).

At a little after ten he put down the book and disappeared into part of the apartment I couldn't see (probably the bathroom; brushing his teeth, washing his face) before returning



to the bedroom. I watched as he peeled off the jeans and T-shirt and then climbed into bed with the book. He read for another hour, set the alarm on the same kind of LED clock that's on the nightstand of my apartment in Hoboken, and then turned out the light and went to bed.

When the window went from bright yellow back to hazy grey, I finally moved. Blinking and rubbing my eyes, I desperately tried to make sense of the last couple of hours. At first I'd thought that the other Jeff was just a ghost. Or, if he wasn't, then perhaps I was. But that was wrong since ghosts don't subscribe to *The Economist* and eat spaghetti, and ghosts don't rent studio apartments and shop at Bed, Bath and Beyond. I also ruled out the possibility that I was either hallucinating or experiencing a flashback. I was too lucid for it to be a hallucination, and it couldn't have been a flashback since I'd never been in that apartment before. I also considered that the scene could have been a kind of flashforward; I was somehow seeing into the future. But the fact that he'd been reading the current editions of *The Nation* and *The Economist*—I had those same exact issues on my coffee table in New Jersey—quickly scuttled that idea.

My head was throbbing, but that was partly due to the fact that I hadn't planned my stakeout very well. Being new to all this, I'd forgotten to bring any food and I hadn't wanted to leave my perch all night for fear I'd miss something; some detail or event that would have explained everything. I'd have to plan better tomorrow, but for now I needed something to eat.

I got out of the chair and discovered that my legs were frozen and my back ached. I shook my body a bit to get the blood flowing and then, using an app on my iPhone, found a Chinese takeout place a few blocks away that was still delivering. After the food arrived, I

continued to sit in the dark, eating my sliced chicken and snow peas and watching the window across the street.

I woke up early the next day, eager to see what was happening in the brownstone. It was nothing too interesting. Jeff woke up, disappeared from the bedroom (probably into the bathroom for a shower and shave), and I then watched him get dressed and leave the apartment. After opening one of the two windows and craning my head outside, I watched him bounce down the brownstone steps wearing an outfit I also had in my closet back in New Jersey: blue checked shirt, grey slacks, black loafers, black digital watch and a Jack Spade messenger bag. I looked across the room and saw the very same messenger bag sitting on the floor of the studio apartment. I was even wearing the same watch, although when I glanced down at it I saw that it was again flashing twelve o'clock. Turning back to the street, I saw him head east, toward Central Park West. After a few seconds he was out of sight.

Figuring that he probably wouldn't be back until tonight, I took a quick shower and then headed to a market a block away for some supplies. I remembered the store from when Grainne and I first lived with each other on Seventy-seventh, across the street from the American Museum of Natural History.

Pioneer was just as I remembered it, although that made sense since the place had always seemed sort of trapped in time. It was the only grocery store I'd been to in decades that didn't feature barcode scanners and conveyor belts for the advancing of groceries to the cashier. Instead, customers placed their items on a three-foot stretch of rubber that resembled the tee-off area for a hole of miniature golf. From there the cashiers merely reached out and grabbed each item, one after the other, punching in their prices individually

using the eraser-tips of pencils. All the cashiers were women, dark black, from a part of Africa that had accented their English French. Meanwhile, the large front windows looking out onto Columbus were perennially wallpapered with advertising supplements for the store. These cheaply-printed fliers acted as a sort of filter, coloring the light the same shade as the food that was on sale that week: meat red, carrot orange, celery green.

I bought half-a-dozen muffins, a tin of coffee, stuff for sandwiches, some milk, orange juice, soda, and a six-pack of beer. Back at the studio I had breakfast and then sat in the chair for another couple of hours watching the street. Nothing much happened. A few delivery trucks passed by, along with dozens of cabs, hundreds of pedestrians, a few joggers, and the mailman working his way up one side of the street before—a half-hour later—coming down the other side. In the early afternoon I took a quick nap and then made myself a sandwich, eating it as I stretched out on the inflatable mattress reading a Raymond Chandler novel I'd brought. At five I roused myself from a horizontal position and manned the chair once again.

At a little after six, Jeff came home. He had an armful of groceries from Westside Market on Broadway (another place I used to shop when we lived on Seventy-seventh Street). I saw the lights come on but, unlike yesterday, he didn't change into jeans and a T-shirt. Instead he read a bit on the couch and watched some TV. But then, just after seven, he gathered his keys and wallet from the dresser in the bedroom and disappeared from view. Figuring he must be leaving for a walk, or maybe getting some food, I jumped out of the chair. I threw on my shoes and headed downstairs.

Through the glass windows of the Wakefield's lobby, I could see Jeff walking down the steps of the brownstone across the street. He headed east, toward Columbus. I counted to five and then hit the street. I emerged just in time to see him turn left and head north. I

sprinted to the corner; I didn't want to fall too far behind. As I got to Columbus he was turning right onto Seventy-fourth Street. I sprinted up the block and, just as I reached the corner, I saw Jeff ring the buzzer at my therapist's building. After a second's wait—and even from across the street—I could hear the loud *Bzzzzzzt* of the lock being released. He grabbed the door and disappeared into the building, presumably heading to Dr. Schwartz's apartment on the fifth floor. My watch was still flashing twelve o'clock, so I checked my iPhone: 7:08. It was Wednesday; my appointments were on Thursdays.

I contemplated running toward the building and buzzing Dr. Schwartz, trying to get to the bottom of whatever was happening. I even made it halfway across Seventy-fourth Street before I paused, lost my nerve, and turned around. I still thought this was, somehow, a dream. It certainly couldn't be real. I headed back down Columbus, stopping only to duck into Pioneer for more beer.

Thursday was pretty uneventful. Jeff woke up, went to work, and came home around six. He switched into jeans and a T-shirt and then sat on the couch and watched TV. At seven I contemplated keeping my therapist appointment (it seemed silly not to go since it was just a block away), but I didn't want to miss anything across the street. I sent Dr. Schwartz a text saying that I had an emergency and couldn't come.

On Friday night, Jeff ordered a pizza. I watched as he dimmed the lights in the living room, slipped a DVD into the player, and then relaxed on the couch with a beer and a couple of slices. This gave me the chills since that's what I used to always do on a Friday night. I couldn't tell what movie it was, but it looked to be an old one; it was in black-and-white and featured people in hats who traveled by train. It was probably an Alfred Hitchcock

movie, since he's my favorite director. Seeing the pizza made me hungry and, for the first time since the Chinese food on Monday, I strayed from my stakeout diet. I ordered a pizza and ate it as I watched the other Jeff eat pizza across the street.

On Saturday afternoon he headed out for another run. Deciding to tag along, I trailed at a discreet distance as he walked down Seventy-third Street performing the same stretches as last week when I saw him for the first time. As I followed him into the park, crossing the winding lanes of blacktop filled with bikers and joggers, I could tell that Jeff was headed for the Reservoir.

He approached it from the southwest corner where there's an entrance along with a drinking fountain and a couple of benches. I watched as he took a few sips of water, performed a few more stretches, and then set off on a counter-clockwise lap. As I saw him recede in the distance—the swirling, crooked tip of the Guggenheim poking out amongst the trees—I couldn't get over how peculiar the feeling of watching myself was. It felt like an out of body experience, or watching a scene in a movie that was about my life. I pinched myself—hard—making sure that I was real and that he was the phantom or ghost.

I sat down on a bench and took out the Raymond Chandler novel I'd brought to pass the time. Every couple of minutes I looked up from the book and scanned the runners approaching on the path, trying to pick myself out from the crowd. I finally saw him lodged behind a trio of runners who seemed to be together and were running in a triangle formation. As Jeff passed, overtaking the trio as he rounded the corner where I was sitting, I noticed that sweat had begun to darken his T-shirt around the neck and in the small of the back. I used to run a lap in about twelve minutes and because of this I knew, like a comet,

exactly when he was going to come around again. I got out my iPhone and set the timer for eleven minutes.

I managed to read half a chapter before the alarm went off. I was so sure about my prediction that I lingered with the book for another thirty seconds, wanting to finish the page and see how Marlowe managed to get out of his latest scrape. When I finally looked up, I saw Jeff rounding the corner—just like last time—but with his shirt almost totally soaked with sweat.

After he disappeared down the path as it curved to the left in anticipation of running north, parallel to Fifth Avenue, I got up from the bench and began to walk back to the Wakefield. I was more confused than ever. The version of me currently running laps around the Reservoir seemed like an exact copy—a perfect replica—of who I used to be. On Friday nights I'd order a pizza and watch old movies. On Saturday afternoons I'd go for a run in Central Park. I began to get a headache just thinking about it, and that combined with the heat of the day started to make me dizzy. I needed to go back to the studio apartment; to get back into the chair. I needed to look even harder and try to figure out what was happening.

That night, Jeff had a visitor. A woman. After watching him take a shower and then spend a couple of hours cleaning the apartment, he ended the day by lighting candles and continually rearranging the magazines on his coffee table. At a little after seven he disappeared from the living room, reappearing a few seconds later and ushering an attractive woman into the room.

As soon as I saw her through the window, I recognized her from a few minutes before, down on the street. My watching the windows also meant watching the building

itself: who came, who went. What was delivered and when. I'd seen this girl approach the brownstone, check her hair and makeup in a compact pulled from a small black purse, and then climb the staircase before ringing one of the apartments. I hadn't considered that she was there to see Jeff.

She was tall, 5'6 or 5'7, with hair that looked brown or light blond. She was wearing high heels with dark skinny jeans and a black blouse that looked shiny. Her right hand wore a silver watch that was loose and dangled like jewelry. I thought I detected makeup—lips red enough to be seen from across the street couldn't be natural—and I even opened and then stuck my head out the window in order to maybe inhale her perfume, but all I got was exhaust.

Jeff left the living room and returned with two drinks. He offered her one and she accepted it with a smile. They sat on the couch, talking, but I couldn't make out the words. The two of them were, for me, a silent movie soundtracked by the city: lips moved, but all I heard was traffic. At one point she laughed and threw her head back, all of that hair looking like a curling wave crashing on her neck. I wondered what he'd said to make her laugh. When they emptied their glasses, Jeff briefly left the room and then returned with two more. Cigarettes were smoked, the red tips looking like fireflies in the half-light of the apartment. This made me ache for one of my own even though I'd given them up years ago.

At one point, cigarette and drink in hand, the girl got up off the couch and went to the window. I could have sworn she looked right at me. But, after a few seconds, she retreated. Chinese food was delivered a little after nine o'clock. The lights were then completely extinguished, replaced solely by candlelight. From then on the windows across the street were filled mostly with flickers, a cast of shadows.

Confused but hungry, I called Empire Szechuan and put in an order. Running out of cash, I charged it to my debit card. I ordered Pad Thai, vegetable fried rice, and an egg roll. They asked for a name and, after I gave it, the woman said, “Gomez? Seventy-third? We just deliver to another Gomez on Seventy-third. How many of you Gomez are there?”

A black high-heel kicked into view across the street.

I answered, “Apparently, a few.”

She left early on Sunday, wearing what she wore the night before (only not wearing it quite as well). Jeff left the building an hour later wearing Puma sneakers, faded jeans, and a Fred Perry polo. He yawned as he walked down the block, heading toward Columbus. I quickly threw on some shoes and ran downstairs.

I followed him for a couple of blocks until he entered a small bagel place that I didn’t remember from when I’d lived in the neighborhood. Through the glass window I saw Jeff standing behind two women with strollers who chatted obliviously while their children yelled and screamed and threw bags of potato chips onto the floor. After the bagel place, he walked back toward the brownstone, stopping at a bodega to buy a copy of *The New York Times* and a carton of orange juice. Back upstairs he read half the paper, ate both bagels and, after that, disappeared.

I didn’t see him either enter or leave the brownstone. The lights were never turned on, and I didn’t see anyone—Jeff or that woman—in the apartment. Food was delivered to the building—a pizza and something else, I couldn’t tell; probably Chinese—as were groceries by Fresh Direct, but those supplies could have been for anybody.



But then, late in the afternoon, Jeff suddenly threw on some shoes and left the apartment. I grabbed my wallet and keys to the studio. By the time I headed downstairs I emerged from the elevator only to see myself, across the street, standing idly on the stoop. I hid as best as I could behind the doorman, trying to waste a few seconds until my double set out for wherever it was he was headed. I felt naked and vulnerable in the lobby but, thankfully, after just a couple of seconds Jeff descended down his stairs and started heading west on Seventy-third, turning left and then walking south down Amsterdam. I followed, trying to keep a respectable distance on the sidewalk. It was fairly easy to do, although I had to keep space between us by—every block or so—trying to appear interested in a store’s window or a menu outside a restaurant.

At Sixty-ninth Jeff crossed the street and dashed over Broadway, stopping in front of a huge hotel that looked new. I was stranded on the other side, cut off by the traffic. I didn’t have to worry about losing him since he just stood in front of the hotel, the front of which looked like a giant mirror. In fact, I guessed that that was the point; he had lured me there so that he could turn the tables. *He* wanted to spy on *me*.

For a second our eyes met. Or, at least, I think they did. But no, that was crazy. It was just a coincidence. He must have just been checking his hair in the reflection, the same way anyone would when they pass a mirror. A few seconds later a jumble of traffic went by and when it passed Jeff resumed his walk, heading south towards Lincoln Center. I waited a couple of seconds and then followed at a safe distance.

As the walk went on—looping around at Sixty-sixth Street before heading north again via West End Avenue—I knew that he hadn’t seen me. He didn’t know who I was; he wasn’t aware of my presence. I knew this because he didn’t, not once during the course of the walk, turn around to try and catch me looking at him or to see if he was being followed.

After I got back to the Wakefield, after lingering a few seconds on the corner so Jeff could enter the brownstone, the doorman stopped me and said, “What, did you go shopping or something?”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re wearing different clothes.” He pointed to my pants and shirt. When he saw that I wasn’t going to respond, he just shrugged and shook his head.

Upstairs, the apartment seemed different. I couldn’t put my finger on exactly what was out of place; the whole studio just seemed a little *off*. I tried to shake the feeling by going to the window and sitting in the chair. The Raymond Chandler novel I’d been reading earlier seemed to be in a different position from where I’d left it. Also, my bookmark was on the ground instead of being stuck between the pages. Across the street, I couldn’t see anything. He had disappeared again.

On Monday, Jeff didn’t go to work. After the walk on Sunday there’d been nothing else. No action, no movement. Not even a shadow. I began to think that the building had a back entrance, that maybe he’d escaped and had since been staying with that girl who came over on Saturday. I couldn’t think of any other explanation. Just to be sure, I stayed in the chair and watched. All day Monday, nothing. Tuesday, nothing. Wednesday, nothing.

On Thursday I had to head out to Hoboken for my anniversary. I got up from the chair and showered and shaved for the first time in days. I stopped at a boutique called Rosalyn and bought Grainne a pair of vintage sapphire earrings. I paid more than I would have liked to for them but seeing as how I was meeting her for dinner in an hour and didn’t want to be empty-handed, I figured I didn’t have much choice. A few blocks north of this

was a stationery store called Cardeology. I ducked in for some wrapping paper and a card. On the bus ride to New Jersey I wrapped the gift and signed the card. When I got home, Grainne was on the couch reading *The New Yorker* and wearing a black wrap dress that she knew I liked. Her hair was styled and she was wearing make-up, her flat white face dotted with two smoky eyes and bright red lips.

“How was the trip?”

“Fine,” I said, “fine.”

After that there was silence except for a siren in the distance and some landscapers down the street working on the front yard of an apartment building. When it was clear that I wasn't going to elaborate, Grainne got up and grabbed her purse, saying, “Shall we go?”

“Great,” I said.

As we walked to the restaurant that was just a block away on Washington Street, we held hands. It was nice to be close to her again. For the past week I'd felt like I'd been in some sort of limbo, but when I held Grainne's small hand all of that confusion went away. This, finally, was real.

When we got to Amanda's, I held open the door for her and, as she crossed the threshold into the restaurant, she gave me a smile. Amanda's wasn't too crowded and we were seated at a nice table near the window in the second section of the restaurant, overlooking Washington. We'd been to this restaurant before, years ago when Grainne was just my girlfriend and she lived in Hoboken but I lived in Manhattan. As she began to look over the menu and then the wine list, I thought of everything that had—and hadn't—happened since then; all of the twists and turns our lives had taken to get us to this point.

She suggested a wine and I concurred (she knew more about wine than I did). The waiter came and I pointed to the French name, not even attempting to pronounce it.

Grainne then tried to decide what to have for dinner, examining the menu while nibbling on her index finger.

The waiter delivered the wine. The bottle was opened and I motioned for Grainne to taste it. I then surveyed the dishes and silverware on the table, as well as the crisp linen napkin and the votive candle flickering from a breeze coming in from outside. I reached out and picked up my fork. It was heavy stainless steel with three tines. As I did this my peripheral vision caught Grainne nodding to the waiter—*Yes, the wine is fine*—so he began to pour us two glasses, starting with hers.

Staring at the prongs of the fork, I was reminded of a Borges story I'd read years ago called "The Garden of Forking Paths." The core idea of the story was that life is a labyrinth of constantly diverging paths, each one representing the possible choices and outcomes that exist for a person. The same way there are multiple trails to take in a garden there are similar choices we make every day in our lives (with each path leading to different conclusions and outcomes). As Borges wrote, "Each time a man meets diverse alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others." Our lives are basically made, and are the sum result, of the choices we make and the paths that we take. This made me think of the past week, the Jeff I had found on the Upper West Side.

About a year ago Grainne and I were at our lowest point. All we did was fight and talk divorce. The marriage almost ended, and if it had I would have, basically, resumed my former life: get an apartment on the Upper West Side, run in the park, and try and meet someone new. *Maybe, somehow, that's exactly what happened.* When I reached that fork in the road—as Yogi Berra prescribed—I took it.

I suddenly heard my wife say, "Sweetheart, a toast?"

I looked from the fork to her; she was holding up her wineglass.

“Yes,” I replied, trading the fork for my wine. Out of the corner of my eye, outside on the sidewalk, I thought I saw myself standing—trying to hide, really—behind a two-faced clock on the sidewalk. Concentrating again on Grainne, I said, “To *us*.”

SOMEONE'S BEEN WATCHING ME from the Wakefield, the big apartment complex across the street. I noticed him after the building started filling up with tenants a week or so ago. I didn't know whether or not he'd been there since it re-opened (I say *he* even though I still wasn't, at that point, sure it was a man; I had only a silhouette to go by). At first I thought it was just the usual New York spying: an innocent linger by the window that catches an unintended glance of someone else's life. I'd certainly done it to neighbors of mine, and over the years have had more than a few glimpses of other people's lives. But in the past couple of days, and with that silhouette always being there—in the window, across the street, watching me—I decided that this was much more than just casual glances. Someone was on a stakeout, and I was what he was watching.

The Wakefield had been empty when I moved into my one-bedroom apartment on Seventy-third Street about a year ago. For decades it had been a dump (or so I'd been told by the broker who got me into my apartment): an aging refuge for the old and the indigent. “Basically *those* apartments are rented,” she said with her nose crinkling as if she were

holding it, “by people who can’t *afford* to pay rent.” Developers had wanted to get their hands on the building for years. Smack dab in the Upper West Side of Manhattan—two blocks from Central Park and not far from Lincoln Center—even the smallest of apartments hidden inside the warren of the Wakefield would be worth millions. The tenants and their lawyers (who had been paid for with the five and ten dollars bills of the senior citizens who lived there, donations drummed up by Xeroxed fliers slid under doors) beat back the developers, at least at first. Finally—the third time around—the developers won. The Wakefield lost its fight once and for all. Capitalism, Manhattan-style, had won out yet again.

I’d watched all of this unconcerned and a bit bemused. I didn’t want to see anyone get kicked out of their apartment but, I had to admit, all of those old people—shuffling up and down the block using those metal walkers with tennis balls attached to the legs—sort of freaked me out. Not that they bothered me, or anybody else for that matter, but they served as a constant and unwanted reminder that life would one day end; that we’d all get old whether we wanted to or not. Death could be right around the corner (if not just across the street).

After being empty for about three months, the Wakefield roared back to life with an open house that drew hundreds of prospective tenants. I watched from my apartment as crowds made their way through the building, peering through the various windows like a game of Whac-a-Mole. A sign was also put up in the lobby that said APTS FOR RENT LUXORY THREE TWO ONE BEDROOMS AND STUDIO ALL AMMENITIES INCL.

Two weeks ago people starting moving in. In various windows, here and then there—first the second floor and then the fifth—new shapes and forms appeared. Windowbox planters. Purple drapes in one window, blue wooden miniblinds in another.

Furniture arrived carried by movers who looked like they couldn't have cared less: lamps, plants, artwork. And then, finally, people.

The person I was now concerned about—who seemed to be concerned about *me*—was located on the fourth floor in a studio apartment directly across from mine. The fact that I was on the third floor meant he couldn't watch me straight on. His view must have been angled, giving him a four- or five-foot radius around each of my three windows: two in the living room and one in the bedroom.

This was my fourth apartment in New York. I'd lived in Manhattan for over a dozen years, starting with six months on the Lower East Side when I first moved here. I then lived for eight years on Ninety-sixth Street. For two years I lived on Seventy-seventh Street with my wife, Grainne. The only detour, since moving from California in 1997, was when Grainne and I lived in Hoboken for three years. Our marriage fell apart after I decided I didn't want to start a family and she decided that's all she wanted. We got divorced and I moved back to the Upper West Side. That was about a year ago. Since then I'd been doing mostly okay, getting my life back together, starting over. And then I spotted the shadow across the street.

I didn't know what to do. My family was all in California and I knew that telling them about my stalker would only make them worry. It seemed too benign to get the police involved and I didn't even have any good friends I could talk to about what was happening. (I'd lost most of my friends in the divorce, our mutual friends forced to take sides after our bifurcation. Meanwhile, the ones who had, like me, gotten married—but stayed married—I found I no longer had anything in common with. The ones with the kids were the worst; we were like different species.)



This left just Dr. Schwartz, my therapist. But I was afraid of coming off like a complete crackpot. I'd so far managed to keep our sessions free of any kind of overtly psychotic or paranoid ramblings. My weekly hour was usually filled with the mundane regret over my divorce and the challenges of being single at thirty-nine. I wanted more than anything to keep it that way, so instead of sharing this strange news of my life—when my weekly appointment came around on that first Wednesday after the discovery—I kept to the usual topics.

The session passed as it always did; I dredged up old guilt and he made me look at it in a new way. No solutions were offered or revelations arrived at, but I could honestly say I felt better at the end of the session than at the beginning. In between he'd given me a few things to think about, which I tried to do on the short walk home (his office was just a block away). I was actually in a pretty good mood—the session, for once, hadn't left me feeling morose or introspective; missing my ex-wife or depressed about the divorce—but as soon as I headed down Seventy-third Street, and saw the awning for the Wakefield, I got a small chill. Pushing those thoughts out of my mind, I went upstairs, ate dinner while watching TV, and then read magazines and a book (not that I was able to focus much on anything).

As the days continued to pass, I was pretty sure that whoever was across the street was still watching me. Every time I walked by the window I saw the same sight: the outline of a man sitting in a chair, by the window, looking down into my apartment. After a few days of him being so still for so long, I was convinced it was just a dummy or a mannequin. But when I finally, on Thursday, saw him getting up from his chair—he was gone just a few minutes—I knew once and for all that this was a real person. For some reason I was relieved. The fact that my stalker was flesh and blood seemed less creepy than someone trying to make me *think* I was being watched.

On Friday I came home, changed into a T-shirt and jeans, ordered a pizza, opened a beer, and rifled through my old films to find something fun to watch. Hitchcock's my favorite director so I picked *Shadow of a Doubt*. The pizza arrived and I enjoyed the movie as I ate. With the lights off and the story of murder in small-town America unfolding on my flat-screen TV, I began to regret my choice. The film began to creep me out and only added to my paranoia. I should have chosen something light and fun, like *North by Northwest* or *The Lady Vanishes*. Instead, as the black-and-white movie flickered on the TV and washed the room in blinking monochrome, I looked across the street and thought I saw that face in the shadows doing just what I was doing: looking out the window while eating pizza.

On Saturday, after a light breakfast and a morning mostly wasted on the Internet Googling "stalkers," I put on my running clothes and headed outside. It was a gorgeous day; still hot out even though October was just a few days away. The warm air felt good and I did my usual routine, loosening up as I walked down Seventy-third Street toward Central Park. As I stopped at various stoops to stretch, I occasionally glanced down Seventy-third to see if I was being followed. There was no one else on the block except a short Hispanic guy locking up a bike to a tree.

As I approached the Reservoir for my weekly three laps, I started to take deep breaths as preparation for the run. A few feet from the track I started to lightly trot, just to get the blood going. Finally hitting the Reservoir, I started my stopwatch the second my feet hit the dirt. By the time I rounded the first corner, heading up the east side of the park, I'd slipped into the rhythm of the run.

Rounding the southwest corner—passing the entry point where I'd come onto the track about a dozen minutes before—I looked down at my wrist to check my time. But instead of seeing my watch reeling off seconds, the face was flashing twelve o'clock. When I looked up, I saw someone who looked exactly like me sitting with crossed legs on a park bench reading what seemed to be a novel; the book was in his lap and his face—*my* face—was resting in his left palm.

Shocked, my legs went out of sync and I had to fight to keep up with my forward momentum. This caused a chain reaction with a few other runners who had been behind me; they bumped into me as I slowed down and then scrambled to resume my former pace. I tried to look back to the park bench, but the view by then was obscured by other runners and a handful of tourists who'd crossed the track in order to pose by the fence for photographs.

As I continued around the Reservoir, I tried to analyze what just happened. *Surely that couldn't have been me sitting on the park bench.* I shook my head hard, trying to get the thought out of my mind. Yes, he had looked just like me, and the pose—and even the clothes—were reminiscent of my style. But then again, after convincing myself all week that I was being watched, I was on edge. *It was a hallucination. That's all.*

Ten minutes later, as I headed down the corridor that ran parallel to Central Park West, at the very end I could see the bench where my double—that other version of me I could have sworn I saw—had been sitting before. Beyond that was a drinking fountain and beyond even that the Pinetum and the Great Lawn. As I got a bit closer, slowing down my usual pace and moving from the inside of the running path—hugging the fence—to the outside, I was astonished to see him still seated on the park bench. This time, however, I didn't get as good of a view since the book was raised and obscured most of his face. But I

could still see from the clothes—shoes and pants and a shirt that I own—that he was an exact duplicate of me. Rounding the corner I turned my head hard to the right for a good look but, in that brief second, all I could focus on was the cover of the book. I could clearly make out its title in elegant script: *The High Window*.

A cold sweat of fear instantly mixed with the hot sweat from my run. I suddenly made a connection between that figure on the park bench and the shadowy figure in the Wakefield. I wasn't sure it was the right connection, but it seemed to fit. After all, the person in the window across the street was a man—as far as I could tell—and the silhouette certainly seemed to match (any man losing his hair becomes more familiar with the outline of his head than he wants to). And since I didn't lead a very interesting life and I'm not a spy (thus worthy of being spied on), who else—but me—would have the interest to watch me for days at a time?

These thoughts consumed me for the rest of my last distracted lap around the Reservoir and, for once, I didn't time all of my laps or gauge my progress by various landmarks along the way. I didn't even finish my third lap. I strayed from the track just past the bridge at Ninety-sixth Street, running alongside the Reservoir on the bridle path. I figured I could sneak up on my double sitting on the bench and get a better look than the two glimpses I'd had before. Maybe I could even turn the tables, spying on him instead of the other way around. If I could follow him back to the Wakefield, that would have pretty much clinched it. I wouldn't be any closer to the ultimate solution of my mystery, but at least I'd have a better grasp of the players.

I slowed down to a trot as I came to the benches and water fountain. The bridle path was shaded thanks to a ring of tall trees that ran alongside it. I'd relaxed my pace so much that I was no longer sweating. My shirt felt cold and heavy against my skin, like the lead

apron they make you wear at the dentist to get X-rays. Approaching the bench slowly, I discovered that he was no longer sitting there. The bench was empty. For a second I considered approaching the bench anyway and looking for clues, but what could I possibly find? I took a few sips from the drinking fountain and began heading home.

I walked oblivious to the crowds swirling around me enjoying the gorgeous New York day. I stumbled numbly back to my apartment. As I climbed the steps to my brownstone, I noticed that my digital watch was still flashing twelve o'clock. Looking up to the fourth floor of the Wakefield I could see—in the apartment opposite mine—a figure sitting in the window.

As I showered I thought about my plans for that night; Leah was coming over for dinner. The idea was to keep it simple. We were just going to have a few drinks and order in some Chinese food. After my run-in with my double at the Reservoir, and with my stalker across the street, my first impulse was to cancel the date. To do this I'd have to lie to Leah, making up some story. Or else, I suppose, I could tell her the truth but then we'd both be freaked out. Neither seemed like a good option.

I glanced at the clock. It was almost five and she was due to come over at seven. We hadn't been dating long enough for me to start pulling stunts like that (canceling a date with only two hours notice and no good reason). Plus, I would have seemed insane calling her and saying that she couldn't come over because a clone had moved in across the street and was tormenting me. She'd be sure it was an excuse, a cover for something else—something worse—and if I shattered that trust now I might not ever get it back.

There's a W. Somerset Maugham story I read years ago but have thought of often since then. Titled "The Door of Opportunity," it's about—the same as many of his stories—an English couple stationed in the Far East who live the typical colonial life of houseboys, rainy seasons, tiffin, and the London papers arriving six weeks after they'd been printed. In this particular story Anne and Alban Torel are stationed in Daktar, a small community where Alban is the District Officer. They've been happily married for eight years despite the fact that Alban is only a minor regional manager. One day reports come in that, up river, a bunch of Chinese workers have taken over a rubber plantation, killing its owner and putting others—including women and children—at risk. The incident ended up sparking a full-blown riot on the plantation. Alban, back in Daktar, has less than a dozen policemen at his disposal. His men versus a 150 rioting workers seems to him like suicide, so he decides to wait and send for reinforcements who are two days away. He explains his decision to his wife and others by assuring them, "We couldn't do any good by going up now."

When Alban and the reinforcements finally make it to the plantation forty-eight hours later, they discover that the riot has already been quelled—with a single shot fired—by the Dutch manager of a local timber farm. Alban is then recalled to England by his London superiors and, once there, is fired for his reticence to deal directly and immediately with the riot (even though he's still convinced that he did the right thing). His wife goes along for the trip, but leaves him almost as soon as they arrive. The reason she gives is that she no longer loves or trusts him, having lost confidence the day he learned of the riot. She says, in the story's final scene, "For eight years I worshipped the ground you trod on. You were everything to me. I believed in you as some people believe in God. When I saw the fear in your eyes that day...I was shattered. It was as though someone had wrenched my heart out

of my body and trampled on it. You killed my love there and then, Alban. You killed it stone-dead.”

In an instant—because of one decision; choosing one course of action over another—he’d lost her. And not that I was convinced that Leah was the one for me, but I didn’t want to screw up the evolution of the relationship by freaking her out with this one thing before we’d had dates that numbered in double digits. Leah represented, as in the title of Maugham’s story, a door; an opportunity. These kinds of doors were everywhere, and they could be slammed shut quite easily. I had to be careful. You lose people in an instant; you gain them over time.

“What do you mean, ‘someone’s following me?’”

I hadn’t meant to tell her, but she could sense pretty much from the second she entered that something was wrong. After opening the door I’d complimented her outfit, kissed her on the cheek—getting a whiff of her perfume as I leaned in to do so—and, at that point, things were going well. I’d spent the remainder of the afternoon cleaning up the apartment and lighting candles and, by the time Leah arrived, everything was perfect. She came in, we kissed, and then I went into the kitchen to make us a couple of drinks. In the other room my iPod was shuffling through a playlist I’d named *Good Songs Quiet*. At that moment “I’m a Mess” by Nick Lowe was just getting started; it was an omen of what was to come. I reentered the room, handed her the drink, and that’s where things went south. I was edgy and lit a cigarette. Then she lit one. For a few minutes we just sat there, drinking and smoking, Nick Lowe serenading us. She may not have known me for too long but she could certainly tell when someone was acting strange. I protested at first, promising that nothing

was wrong, that it was just a headache, that it wasn't her. But she persisted and, in a matter of seconds, I crumbled and told her that I was being followed.

"I mean..." I started to speak but then stopped. I stared down into my vodka and tonic. My cigarette was finished so I quickly lit another. The iPod, acting as both chaperone and Greek chorus, served up "Isn't Life Strange?" by The Clientele. Finally, I continued. "I don't know, I guess I mean just that. I'm being followed."

"But *who's* following you, and how long has this been going on?"

"A week, maybe. Two. I'm not sure."

"But what do you *mean*?" Leah sounded like she was getting exasperated; she'd only been here for ten minutes. "Like, a guy with a trench coat and sunglasses is following you on the subway? Or there's a car with tinted windows trailing you on the street?"

"No—no, it's not like that. It's more like...*surveillance*."

She started to take a sip of her drink but stopped as soon as I said this.

"Like, your phone is being tapped?"

"I mean, someone's *watching* me." I should have just left it at that but, some for some idiotic reason—I guess I'd mixed the drinks too strongly and the vodka was already taking effect—I elaborated. "I mean, we're being watched *right now*."

My eyes led from Leah out the window, nodding toward the Wakefield.

She looked a bit spooked but got up anyway, walking to the window with her drink in one hand and a Marlboro Light in the other. As she stood next to the window, the breeze coming in blew the fringe of her black blouse against her body, outlining her curves. I felt like a fool for mentioning any of this.

"Where?" Her head moved back and forth like a typewriter carriage, scanning every inch of Seventy-third.



“Fourth floor, in the big building across the street.”

She zeroed in on him in a second, I could tell.

“What do you see?” I asked.

“I don’t know...what I see,” she answered slowly. “A guy, I guess. I mean, there’s certainly *something* there.” She turned to me. “But how do you know it’s not just a cardboard cut-out or something like that? Don’t they do that, to curb crime? Stick a dummy in a window and hope people think that it’s real and that they could call the cops?”

“Yeah, but that dummy is staring right into *my* window. The rest of the street doesn’t even know that he’s there. It’s *me* he’s watching, not the neighborhood. Besides all that, I’ve seen it *move*. I’ve seen it get up and walk around the room. Cardboard cut-outs don’t do that.” Pausing to take a sip, I noticed I’d put into my drink two slices of lime instead of one. On the iPod “He Lives My Life” by The Go-Betweens was playing. I blinked, hard. “Plus, the other night when I was eating pizza, *he* was eating pizza.”

“Wow, that’s pretty weird. Wait,” she said quickly, turning back to the window, “you’re sure it’s a man?”

“Not 100 percent, but pretty much.”

Leah retreated from the window, sat down on the couch and this time grinned instead of seeming creeped out by the whole thing. She tapped her cigarette on the edge of an ashtray.

“How do you know it’s not a woman?” she said. “Some jealous old girlfriend who never got over you and has to keep track of you every second of the day?” She laughed as she said this, trying to lighten the mood I’d made so heavy. “Or maybe it’s your ex-wife, gone a little crazy and so she’s...”

Her words trailed off; she knew she'd gone too far. Not that I wasn't willing to talk about my marriage, or even my myriad faults, but bringing Grainne into it—even Leah knew—was out of bounds.

“Jeff, listen, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—”

I raised a hand and this silenced her.

“Don't worry about it. It's not a big deal, I swear.”

I was actually grateful for her slip. It provided an off-ramp from the topic, a chance to talk about something else. I also was glad to see the fear in her face when she thought she had erred. This flattered me. Thinking back to the Maugham story I'd remembered earlier in the day, maybe I was also, to Leah, a door. But I shouldn't have been too flattered; there are doors everywhere. In fact, life is pretty much just that: a series of doors all in a row, each one representing a choice or an opportunity. Shakespeare was wrong; the world's not a stage, it's a hallway.

The next morning Leah had to leave early to meet some friends for brunch in the Village. I offered to go with her but she insisted that it was okay that I didn't. I tried to read in her voice whether or not she was being honest when she said this. Was it really just a bunch of her girlfriends getting together or was it a couples-thing that she was ashamed to bring me to? We'd had a pleasant evening the night before, despite the rocky start, so I decided to believe her.

I slept in for another hour before finally getting up. I made the bed and then threw on faded jeans and a Fred Perry polo. From the dresser I grabbed my keys and wallet, and I then slipped into some blue Puma sneakers with straps covering the top of each shoe in a Z

instead of laces. Before heading out for bagels, I took a quick peek through the blinds. I thought I saw something on the fourth floor of the Wakefield—maybe it was a person; maybe it was somehow me—but I just couldn't tell. I fought off the paranoia, along with a small hangover, and headed out into the bright Sunday.

The neighborhood was quiet. Any day that you can hear birds more than traffic in New York is a triumph: people outnumbered by animals. It was rare, but it happened. I managed to walk the three blocks to the bagel place without passing a single person. Inside, instead of the usual long line littered with strollers, joggers, and tourists (and the occasional person dressed nicely for church), there were only two housewives ahead of me with their strollers. Normally, seeing children reminded me of Grainne and the decision I'd made that led to our split, but on that morning—with bigger things on my mind—I managed to block them out. In no time I had my bagels, gave my change as a tip, and was out the door. On the way back to the apartment I stopped by a bodega to get the Sunday *Times* and a carton of orange juice. As I was paying, I saw someone walk by who looked disconcertingly like me. I rushed out of the bodega, not even waiting for my change, only to see a guy in shorts and a T-shirt who was a foot shorter than I was and twenty pounds heavier.

As I skipped up the steps of my apartment building, I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Someone seemed to dart behind a tree as soon as I turned. I dropped my groceries and hunched down on the brownstone's staircase. I slowly raised my head and peeked over the stoop. For a few seconds I kept my eyes trained on the tree. There was definitely someone there. I could vaguely see a figure on the other side. A shoulder and then a leg popped out from behind the green-and-beige tree trunk. But I couldn't see a face. Just as I stood up, to get a clearer view, the figure behind the tree emerged and I could see that it

was an elderly woman walking a dog. I reached for the keys in my jeans and, when I did, discovered that my hands were shaking.

Upstairs I made a pot of coffee, removed about half the cream cheese from my bagels, unhooked the iPod and put on instead an old CD by Air Miami. I then settled down on the couch to read the paper and have my breakfast. I occasionally glanced out the window, to the Wakefield across the street, but every time I thought I saw the figure in the window looking down at me I became just as convinced that it was a shadow or light on the windowpane or the reflection of a passing cloud on the glass. I believed any explanation other than the one that said there's another Jeff Gomez on the fourth floor across the street.

After nibbling at my bagels and absentmindedly sipping at my coffee, I realized I wasn't retaining any of the information from the stories I'd been half-heartedly reading. Also, the music in the background seemed like an undecipherable fuzz. My mind was elsewhere.

I got up, turned off the CD, and placed the dishes in the sink. I then marched into the bedroom and took my desk chair and placed it at the left corner of my bed. This gave me a bit of a view of the fourth-story window across the street but, hopefully, put me at such an angle that whoever was across the street was at a disadvantage when it came to spying into my windows. This seemed to me optimal: I could see him, but he couldn't see me. It seemed like a game of cat and mouse except, as Rory Granger says at the end of *Rope*, "Which is the cat and which is the mouse?"

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After just a few hours of this I needed some air. I put the Pumas back on and headed outside. Downstairs I lingered a bit on the stoop, wanting to make sure my double was taking the bait. Looking through the glass windows and into the lobby of the Wakefield, I could see standing behind the doorman (who was wearing a short-sleeved version of his blazer) someone about my size and shape milling around, trying to look inconspicuous in front of the elevators that were opening and closing behind him like a pair of eyes independently blinking.

I then set off down Seventy-third, walking west towards Amsterdam. At the corner I headed south. I wasn't sure where I was going; I just had to get out of my apartment. I then remembered a new hotel that had been built on the east side of Broadway between Sixty-ninth and Sixty-eighth Street. It was a huge, mirrored slab rising up forty stories and sitting just south of a small island of concrete formed by Broadway slicing through Amsterdam in its crooked path. I thought that if I stood in front of the hotel I would be able to see my double, behind me and across the street, in the reflection. It would finally give me some tangible evidence, proving whether he was real or just a phantom.

I walked toward the hotel slowly, wanting to give my pursuer a chance to stay on my tail. When I approached the hotel, I ran across the street, making sure that my double remained on the other side. As I leaped up the curb, and stood in front of the mirrored-façade that seemed to be as big as you could possibly make one segment of glass, I searched in the reflection for myself. There he was, standing on the other side of Broadway.

In between the cabs heading south, standing on the other side of the street and looking a bit confused, was another version of me wearing jeans and a T-shirt. He looked uneasy, knowing I was watching him. His eyes looked into mine.

I then saw—or at least I *thought* I saw—yet another version of me. This one was passing behind the first version, hands in his pocket and walking up Broadway.

When I turned around so I could look head-on without the aid of the mirror that I was sure was playing tricks on me, all I could see was traffic obscuring my vision. When the cars were gone, so were the other versions of me. The sidewalk was filled instead with the usual assortment of strangers. I stared for a couple of minutes for some sign, some signal, some trace of my mystery, but there was nothing. Dazed, I headed south another couple of blocks before going down Sixty-sixth and then heading north up West End Avenue. By the time I made it back to the brownstone I'd been gone for almost an hour.

When Monday arrived, I didn't go to work. I left an outgoing message on my voicemail saying I wasn't feeling well and wasn't sure when I'd be back in the office. I then snuck into the kitchen to make a huge pot of coffee, took a very quick and hot shower, and then resumed my station in the room. It was an overcast day, finally cool and threatening rain. The darkness helped me see more clearly into my double's apartment. All I saw was my double staring right back at me.

On Tuesday, while I was watching Jeff watch me, the phone rang. At first I was going to ignore it. But then I figured maybe it was Leah thanking me for the other night, so I decided to answer.

“Hello?”

There was silence for a few seconds before a voice asked, “Who is this?”

“This is Jeff, who's *this*?”

The voice sounded oddly familiar. In fact, it sounded exactly like my own voice. Panicked, I looked across the street to see if my double had finally decided to up the stakes by actually contacting me. But no, he was still there in the window; I could clearly see both of his hands. No cell phone, no nothing. He wasn't the one who was calling.

"Who *is* this?" I barked into the phone. "What do you want, money? I don't have a lot of money."

The line went dead. I hung up the phone and went back to my vigil.

Wednesday was the same. The routine of cat-and-mouse had turned into a game of chicken, and I wasn't going to be first one to move. I skipped my appointment with Dr. Schwartz and instead stayed in the chair, staring across the street.

On Thursday, finally, there was some activity. Jeff got out of his chair and walked around the small space. I crept closer to the window in order to get a better look. Ten minutes later he was wearing a blazer and slacks. He took a quick peek across the street, down into my apartment, and as he did so I crept away from the window. I could then see the door of his apartment open and close. *He's leaving.* I decided to follow him.

From my dresser I pulled out some old jeans and a pair of socks. I grabbed a button-down shirt from the floor I'd worn last week that was already buttoned-up. I threw all of this on, grabbed my keys, wallet, and slipped into my Pumas—as well as an old black baseball cap—and I flew out the door. I made it downstairs in time to see Jeff walking east, toward Columbus.

There were lots of people on the sidewalk—everyone was coming home from work—so it was hard to follow him without getting too close and drawing attention to us both. But I managed to discreetly trail him as he went to a boutique called Rosalyn and then

a card store named Cardeology. After that he hustled south down Broadway. I followed him through Verdi Square and into the subway station. He headed for the downtown trains.

Once on the platform I glanced as inconspicuously as I could, trying to see where he was. I spotted him near the end, looking up both sides of the tunnel; that meant that he was willing to take either a local or an express train. As I tried to watch him out of the corner of my eye, but also did my best to seem as if I was looking at nothing at all, I tried to think back to that subway scene in *The French Connection*. How, exactly, was this done?

After just a couple of minutes, a local train pulled into the station. Amidst the crowd of people getting on and off I spotted Jeff getting on. I raced down the platform and managed to slide into the same car I saw him enter—although at the other end—just as the doors were closing. It was one of the newer cars, the ones I didn't like: shiny and bright, with the computer-voice messages calling out the stops and telling everyone to have a nice day.

The train was crowded, so I had no trouble keeping an eye on my double while also managing to remain hidden. Leaning against the far set of doors, looking dapper in a blazer I also owned and had in the closet of my apartment on Seventy-third Street, Jeff seemed deep in thought. I wondered what I was wondering about.

The train rolled through its stations, stopping at Lincoln Center and then Columbus Circle. At Times Square it looked like Jeff was going to get off. As the doors opened, it was hard to follow him up the platform; the crowd was moving one way and I wanted to move in the opposite direction. I managed to shove my way left, catching sight of Jeff as he exited the tunnel that led from the 1/2/3 trains. It was difficult to stay on his trail as he weaved in and out of commuters. There seemed to be just as many people below Times Square as there were above ground.



Once free of the hub of various subway stations, there was a long corridor and then a sloped stretch where a half-dozen religious nuts were always handing out pamphlets and posing alongside signs that advertised the usual biblical nonsense. As I walked I began to get a profound sense of *déjà vu*. I remembered all of this from years ago, from when Grainne and I were married and lived in New Jersey.

For almost three years I took the PATH train from Hoboken into Manhattan for work, but I'd occasionally take the bus into or from Port Authority. From there I'd head for the 1 or C train to take me uptown or downtown. Before that, before Grainne and I were married—when she lived in Hoboken but I lived on Ninety-sixth Street—I would take the bus out to see her. Since the divorce, I'd never again been through this underground stretch of New York; I'd never had a reason to.

After a long walkway that was stifling with heat, I could see Jeff turn left, definitely heading for Port Authority. Rounding the corner, I watched him walk through a series of turnstiles and then make a right, heading into the bus terminal. Jeff then went up an escalator, skipping steps even as he was being hauled to the top; I must have been late for wherever it was I was going. Once at the top he walked briskly down a corridor that had a number of bus ticket kiosks on one side and a newsstand on the other. He then turned left, heading up another escalator. At that point, after getting stuck behind a couple of college kids dragging big blue bags from Ikea, I was jogging to keep up. As I caught sight of Jeff joining a long line that hugged the wall opposite a number of vendors selling things like bracelets and cell phone cases from wooden carts, I slowed my pace. The terminal was filled with the last waves of rush hour, people trying to get to their various homes after another long day in Manhattan. I tried to blend in.

The line began to move, and I jumped to join it. As the line kept moving—we were now walking up the stairs; I could hear the bus idling and could even smell its fumes—I ransacked my wallet and pockets for the necessary change, somehow coming up with the \$2.55 I needed. We all began to file in and I saw Jeff take what was always my favorite seat: almost all the way in the back, on the left, against the windows.

I was able to get a seat near the front of the bus, sitting on the sideways bench seats rather than the rows facing forward. This was good since it allowed me to see Jeff farther back in the bus. People continued to get on, and a few people had to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in the aisle that ran the length of the bus.

As we exited Port Authority, headed for the Lincoln Tunnel, I lost Jeff. The sun had just set and the lazy last sunlight streaming through the tinted windows gave everything in the bus an eerie pink glow. But once we began to go through the tunnel, making our way underground from New York to New Jersey, I spotted him staring out the window and rocking back and forth in rhythm with the bus's motion.

Since we were still miles from the first stop, I tried to relax and catch my breath from my sprint through Port Authority. I actually began to clear my mind and eased into the surroundings that felt so familiar. This could have been a year-and-a-half ago; I could have been coming home from a meeting in Midtown. At that point, as the bus turned onto Fourteenth Street and with the Malibu Diner just beyond the intersection, I'd be getting out my iPhone in order to call Grainne to see if there was anything she needed from the store: milk or juice or maybe just some ice cream as a treat. Sometimes I stopped to get her flowers, just for fun, from a place called Fresh Picked.

As the bus turned right onto Washington, I shook myself out of my memories since—if this was really me I was following, and I was on some sort of *Christmas Carol* trip

back in time—Jeff would be getting off in just a minute at Tenth Street. As the bus pulled up to the stop, a few commuters crowded near the front and rear doors in preparation for getting off. Toward the back of the bus I saw Jeff standing in the aisle, third in line for the door. I remained sitting, not wanting to draw any attention. At the last second I leapt through the door at the front of the bus, just as it was about to close. The bus driver shot me a harsh glance, but he then softened and looked confused. Had he seen me, seconds before, exit at the back of the bus? Had he recognized me? Was he somehow in on whatever this was? I didn't have time to worry about this since, as the bus was pulling away, I saw Jeff cross Washington and walk up Tenth Street. At the corner he turned right, heading south down Hudson. I followed him. The apartment where I lived with Grainne—when we were married—was just a few doors down on the right.

I hadn't been back to this block in over a year. The street looked more or less the same; a few of the brownstones looked like they'd been redone, but that was no surprise since—during the years I lived here with Grainne—there was always a home nearby being worked on. Most Saturday mornings started with the sound of jackhammers or generators going off somewhere along the block. Farther up the street, looking north, I could see from the number of lights that the cluster of high-rises along the water were finally open. There was hardly a blank spot in the checkerboard of windows. This once small and charming town, only a mile square, was on its way to no longer being so charming.

As I approached my old apartment building, I passed a silver Volkswagen Jetta parked on the street. I thought that this was Grainne's car—she bought it the year before we were divorced—but I couldn't be sure. There had also been another car in the area, the same make but a newer model, and from time to time it was parked on our block. Whenever Grainne saw it she'd exclaim, "There's my twin!"

Just as I looked up at my old apartment on the fourth floor, I saw Jeff come to the window and look down into the street. I scurried across Hudson and hid behind one of the leafy trees that lined the quiet block.

The last time I'd looked out that window was the day Grainne left. She moved out first, on a Friday. I was planning to move out the following Sunday. Her movers had been at it most of the day, helping her with last-minute packing and then getting all of her stuff into their van that was double-parked down below. I hadn't meant to run into her but I got off work early and she was running behind schedule. It actually didn't end up being much of a confrontation. At that point, there wasn't much left to fight about. All she did was ask, one last time, "Jeff, *please*...this is your last chance." I didn't say anything. I just stared at her; the silence gave her my answer. She then walked out the door and slowly shut it behind her. I stood there for a few seconds, knowing what she was doing on the other side of the door: waiting for the elevator. It was a crazy feeling; there was only a door between us. A few planks of wood no more than an inch-or-two thick. But in those seconds that door was acting as a clean and clear dividing line. On either side were our new lives: single me and single her. For a brief instant I felt like running down the hallway and flinging the door open. If I did that I'd be destroying the wall that suddenly stood between us. Our lives could then flow together and mix and we'd be a couple again. But just as the feeling surged in my chest and was about to make me say something, I heard the elevator arrive. My wife got on and I heard the elevator door close. When she emerged in the lobby, she'd no longer be my wife. I then went into the living room and looked down into the street. On the sidewalk, in front of our building, I saw Grainne step slowly down the marble front steps. It looked like she was wiping her eyes but it may have been her nose. She traded a few words with the movers, all of whom were gathered around the front of the moving truck. I heard some muffled talk

and then the movers hustled and got into the truck. A few seconds later, the huge truck roared to life and headed south down the street. My wife walked in the opposite direction, toward her car which must have been parked somewhere nearby to the north. I watched her walk until, due to the window and her walking up Hudson, I couldn't watch her anymore. That was the last I ever saw of her.

As I stared up at the window more than a year later, not really sure what I was doing, I was reminded of the other day when Leah was coming over and I didn't want to fuck things up too fast. I thought, *There's more to that Maugham story*. You don't only lose people in an instant. It was possible—and probably more probable—to lose them over time. Every little mistake, every perceived slight, every dash of resentment and drop of anger; there was a line beneath every relationship, and it all added up.

The light upstairs went out. The living room was now dark, but I could still see shadows moving in the dining room. I looked at my watch; the stupid thing was again flashing twelve o'clock. Even if I didn't know exactly what time it was, I knew it was too early to be going to bed. I continued to watch the windows, and was about to cross the street (to go into the lobby, scanning the buzzer to see if there was anything strange in the building's directory), when I saw Jeff coming out of the building with Grainne.

They descended the steps chatting about something and laughing. I didn't get a good look at Grainne since they turned the corner too quickly, heading south down Hudson. But just hearing her laugh linger in the air made me flood with memory. I slowly crossed the street and began to follow them, these two silhouettes walking ten paces ahead of me.

I could see that his right arm was angled, forming a triangle along with his chest. Into this space Grainne placed her arm. We used to walk like this. In a second, I knew, she'd put her head on his shoulder. She did this, as predicted, as they turned the corner onto Ninth

Street. Ahead of me I watched as Jeff tilted his head to the right, the way I always used to do when she leaned her head on my shoulder. Closing my eyes for a second, I could feel her former presence beside me like a phantom limb.

Ninth was a short block, so it didn't take long for them to cross it. They caught the light at Washington and skipped through the crosswalk. I paused before crossing. An uptown 126 bus headed through the intersection and then stopped, letting off passengers. Sneaking behind the bus, I watched as Jeff held the door open for Grainne at Amanda's, a restaurant a few doors in from the corner.

*Amanda's. It figures.* We used to come here for special occasions or when a parent was in town. We even came here two years ago for our anniversary. *Shit.* Suddenly it hit me. I pulled out my iPhone for confirmation, checking its calendar. *Fuck.* It was our anniversary. Five years. Or rather, it *would have* been five years (we never even made it to four; we separated about fourteen months ago and divorced—officially—about three months after that). And yet somehow I was taking my ex-wife to dinner.

Just a few seconds after disappearing inside the restaurant, Grainne and Jeff reappeared in the dining room to the right of the entrance. They were seated against the window and were handed menus and a wine list. I could see Grainne unfold her napkin and drape it over her lap. They perused the menu for a few minutes, smiling and exchanging words with the waiter when he arrived.

I slowly approached the restaurant, taking cover behind a pole right outside Amanda's atop which sat a large clock with two faces: one face pointed north and the other pointed south. Looking up, I saw that it was 8:11. In the silence of the night air during a momentary lull in traffic on Washington, I actually heard the hands of the clock shift from 8:11 to 8:12.

Inside the restaurant the waiter reappeared and poured wine. As Grainne tasted it, Jeff reached down and picked up a fork. He stared at the fork for what seemed like a long time.

After placing the fork back onto the table, and as the waiter was filling his glass with wine, Jeff looked out the window. For a second, I think, our eyes met; I was once again looking directly into my own eyes. But then he looked away, back to Grainne. He lifted his wineglass, raised it, and I could have sworn I heard the clinking of their glasses as they toasted their married selves.

I WAS BEING WATCHED, I could feel it. Eyes strangely like my own were trained on me but would not let go. I tried to ignore this and go on with my work but it was difficult. Through a sheer force of will I managed to push out the thought that was in my head, typing it on the laptop as quietly as possible (thinking that perhaps my relative silence would be like playing possum and that my tormentor would think I was asleep and thus leave me alone).

This was the sentence I typed:

*I was a teenager when I first discovered the word solipsism.*

After this I paused, trying to sense if the coast was clear. It wasn't. I still could feel those eyes on my back, familiar eyes just like my own. I turned slowly to see if my suspicions were founded; they were. Those tiny eyes were looking right at me. Zachery—in his avocado green and baby blue Little Driver Baby Walker—was looking up at me, his wide brown eyes imploring me to grab him, pick him up, do anything other than sit at my boring desk and ignore him.



“Grainne,” I called out, hoping my wife would be nearby and could take Zachery off my hands. “*Grainne? Are you there?*”

It was Sunday and I was trying to get some writing done. I knew I was taking a risk since Zachery, just a few minutes before, had been crazily wheeling himself throughout the ground floor of our two-story home in Montclair, New Jersey. I was supposed to be watching him while Grainne was upstairs doing housework, but I’d had an idea and so went into the study to write it down.

Grainne didn’t respond. I could hear her walking back-and-forth above me, going in and out of various closets and gathering clothes for a few loads of laundry she hoped to get done when Zachery went down for his daily nap. I thought of yelling again but figured it wouldn’t help. Our bedroom was in the rear of the second story of the house and I was near the front of the ground floor, overlooking the street. I was competing with the sound of traffic and with Zachery determined to smack every button on the control panel of his plastic buggy. I was on my own.

I was trying to get some work done because I’d recently learned that my latest book, a non-fiction title called *Print is Dead*, was going to come out in a few months in paperback. The excitement was somewhat muted when the publisher told me that I couldn’t make any corrections to the text, nor would they print it with a new introduction. I was disappointed but didn’t take it personally. My book was about the future of publishing; it had a limited audience and was never expected or intended to be a bestseller. Still, I wanted to put some of the material I wrote about in context and to discuss new developments with the topic. I decided to write a new introduction anyway, one that would live solely on my website.

Lately I’d been reading books about science. I started with the big bang but then moved on to quantum physics and, finally, to the elusive theory of everything. Einstein had

figured out how the stars worked but those theories didn't gel with incredibly small things like atoms, protons, and electrons. The quest was to unite these two scientific worlds. I wanted to use this as a metaphor for publishing. There was a tried-and-true system for physical books and another business model was rapidly developing for electronic books. What was needed was a theory or set of rules for both. It seemed like a good metaphor: neat and tidy and, hopefully, original.

Across the room Zachery had become momentarily quiet. He was drooling, but otherwise silent. I watched as a string of spittle dripped down his chin and then onto his shirt. He seemed fine with it so I decided I was fine with it, too. I used this lull to write the following:

*The instant I learned of its meaning I loved the word for its poetic simplicity, silky alliteration, and the fact that a collection of just a few letters could encompass such a big idea. Ever since then, while hopefully never suffering from solipsism (if anything I usually experience the opposite), I've thought of the word from time to time. It also occasionally surfaces in print or conversation, or else a character in a movie will say it. But while we can all hope to eradicate solipsism—so that no one person thinks that they're the center of the universe—that doesn't settle the question of the universe itself. After all, what kind of universe has none of us at its center?*

That was as far as I got before Zachery started in again with the buttons that in turn triggered various sounds. He then began shouting at the top of his lungs, drowning out the other noises as if it were a competition.

“Okay, okay, little man.” I got out of my chair and walked toward where he was repeatedly bumping into the doorjamb as he tried to head back into the living room

(Zachery was good at moving forward, but he'd yet to master reverse). "Why don't we go see what Mommy is up to? Huh? What do you say? You want to see Mommy?"

I reached down and scooped him out of the plastic buggy. His body felt warm and fat in my arms.

"*What* is going *on* down here?"

Grainne finally came downstairs. She was wearing beige shorts stained from working in the garden and a green Beck T-shirt I'd bought her years ago. Her black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. She took Zachery from my arms and walked around in circles, bouncing him up and down.

"Well," I said, "I was trying to get some work done."

"Yeah," Grainne replied, still bobbing Zachery up and down in her arms, "and what did this little cuddle monster have to say about it?"

"He had other plans."

She paused for a second and I leaned in for kiss. She then took Zachery upstairs to put him down for a nap. From downstairs I could hear Grainne singing to Zachery, lulling him to sleep. I grabbed the Graco baby monitor sitting on my desk and switched it on just in time to hear the end of the improvised tune she'd been humming.

Grainne and I met in 2003, moved in with each other the following year, got engaged the year after that and were married in 2006. Once Grainne became pregnant we decided we needed more room than we had at the time. We'd been living in an 1,100 square foot, two-bedroom apartment in Hoboken, New Jersey. We'd lived there for just about three years and needed a change anyway. I work in publishing and take New Jersey Transit to my office in Soho. Grainne works in public relations but has taken an indefinite leave of absence to care for Zachery, our son who's just over a year-old.

Grainne came back downstairs. On the monitor I could hear Zachery's heavy breathing; he was already in a deep sleep. Grainne motioned to the kitchen and we both tiptoed toward it.

"So," she said, "how's the new introduction coming?"

She sat down at the kitchen table while I leaned against the counter. It was late September but it was hotter than it should have been for that time of year. Fall, so close on the calendar, felt very far away.

"Fine," I answered, quietly. "At least I think it is. I just wrote a bit of the opening. I think I have a hook. Talked about solipsism."

She grinned. "A topic near and dear to your heart." On the monitor, Zachery sighed or burped or did something that caused a blip of noise. Grainne and I paused to listen. But it was nothing. Then she said, "Do you think you'll ever write another novel?"

It was always funny to me how other people thought it'd be a good idea for me to write books. It was probably because they didn't have to do the writing.

"Writing *Print is Dead* was hard enough. Plus, I have a full-time job and now we have Zachery. Anyway, what would I write about?"

"This, maybe?" She pointed to her, our house, toward the top floor where our son was currently, thankfully, napping.

"Nah," I replied. "That'd have to be that quiet suburban angst I can't stand. *Revolutionary Road* or *Bullet Park*. Picket fences that turn into jail cells. It's been done to death and I'm no John Updike."

"How about being just Jeff Gomez?"

"That didn't work out so well last time."

This was a reference to my last couple of novels, none of which sold very well.

“Besides,” I continued, “I’d have to get all meta this time around, writing myself into the story in some cliché way.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, you know. What Paul Auster does. There’d be a character named Jeff Gomez but it’s not *really* me. And then the novel that the ‘Jeff Gomez’ in the book ends up ‘writing,’” I used the first two fingers of each hand for air quotes, “is actually the book the reader has been reading all along. Blah blah blah. Stuff like that.”

“Well,” Grainne said softly, “do you *have* to do that?”

“Yes, I’d *have* to. It’s a law, I think. Like moving to the suburbs when you have a child.”

She smiled.

“Well, seeing as how law-abiding you were with that last one I’d hate for you to go and get in any kind of trouble.”

A few seconds passed. The silence was deafening but welcome. When I was single—years ago—there was just silence, but now it was rare. It reminded me of those books where you read about everyday items such as salt or cinnamon being treated as valuably as gold or silver. We laugh at their ubiquity now, but in another time they were sacred.

I gave Grainne a quick kiss and headed back to the study. I managed to work for another half-hour until Zachery woke up from his nap. For the rest of our Sunday, he was the center of our attention. We got him fed, bathed him, and put him to bed. I’d written about solipsism earlier in the day, and even though Zachery didn’t and couldn’t know what that meant at his age, he was its perfect embodiment. Grainne and I were merely planets in orbit around him, cold until morning when we’d see his face again.

•

“You’re a ghost.”

I looked up and saw Abby, a co-worker, standing in my doorway. Behind her, through the glass wall of my office, I watched as a group of people from the art department walked by, probably on their way to the conference room around the corner. It was already Tuesday, Monday having passed by in a blur.

“What?” I said, distracted.

“You’re not here,” she replied.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve emailed and called you today. Your email bounced back with an out of the office message and your voicemail said you’re not here. But I thought that was odd since I’d seen you this morning, in the lobby, so I thought I’d stop by. And here you are. A ghost, I guess.”

“Ghost,” I said, lost in thought. This must have made the word sound ominous and, well, *ghostly*.

When I didn’t speak again, Abby broke into nervous laughter.

“Sorry, Jeff, just trying to keep it light.” She fiddled with the red string on an interoffice envelope as she spoke. “At any rate, the reason I’m here is, can you send me last year’s traffic numbers for the website? I need them for the board meetings.”

“Sure, I’ll dig that out of my hard drive and send it up to you.”

“Thanks,” she said. She started to walk away, but then stopped. “Oh, by the way, a friend of mine said she saw you and your wife last week at Bobo.”

“Where?”

“Bobo, it’s on West Tenth Street, I think. Small, charming.”

I knew about and had been to restaurants in Manhattan named Bolo, Babbo, and Beppe, but I wasn’t aware of any place named Bobo.

“Never heard of it. When did you say this was?”

“Last Friday. You and your wife. Corner booth.” Abby smiled slyly. “Sounds *romantic*.”

“Yeah, it does,” I replied, rolling my thin silver wedding band back in forth with my thumb and index finger. Last Friday night I was in Montclair with Grainne and Zachery.

“And they were *sure* it was me?”

“Yup, she saw you speak at a conference. Knew we worked together so she mentioned it. Anyway, send me those stats when you can.” She started to walk away but then stopped yet again and said, “and don’t forget to fix your computer.”

I watched, somewhat in a daze, as Abby disappeared down the hallway. In the background was the general hum of an office: typing, smalltalk, a copier somewhere rhythmically spitting out clones.

I checked my email and, sure enough, the Out of Office message was turned on. I then picked up the phone and dialed my own extension. It took a couple of seconds to route its way through the system before boomeranging back into my handset. When it finally rang, and my own name popped up in the caller ID, it was unnerving to look down and see JEFF GOMEZ in the small LCD window. I was, somehow, calling myself. After five rings the voicemail kicked in. “Hi there, you’ve reached Jeff Gomez. I’m going to be out of the office for the rest of the week.” It was certainly my voice. “You can leave a message for me here, and I’ll return your call as soon as I’m back.”

I wasn't sure what could have caused these two glitches. They were each on a different system; there's no way that it could have been one glitch that switched them both. The fact that I hadn't mentioned any dates in the voicemail message meant that I couldn't tell whether this was an old message from a while ago somehow resurfacing. The same with my email; all the message said was that I was out of the office. No dates, no explanation, no nothing.

I Googled the phone number to Bobo. I dialed and a woman with a British accent answered.

"Hi there, I wanted to check on a reservation for last week."

"For *last* week? Why would you want to do that?"

She had a point.

"I thought I saw an old friend of mine in there last week. Jeff Gomez. Last Friday night. Could you see if he had a reservation? That way, I'd know if it was him."

"Let me see," she replied, sounding skeptical. "Friday night. That was the twenty-fifth, right? Yes, seven o'clock. Jeff Gomez."

This gave me the chills, but I tried to remain calm.

"Oh, great." I faked sounding happy, but wasn't very convincing. "Uh, could you tell me who *made* that reservation?"

There was silence on the other line. Then she laughed and said, "Yeah, I can tell you who made the reservation. *You* did."

I didn't know what to say.

"Mr. Gomez, we have caller ID. I can see that it's *you* who's calling me right now. The number's the same one you gave us so we could confirm your reservation. I even recognize your voice. We spoke last week. You requested a quiet table and I gave it to you.



So, what is this? Some kind of a test? To see if I'd give out a customer's name?" She paused for a second, and then spoke in whisper. "You want to know if you can come here with your mistress or something? Is that who you were with that night?"

"No," I protested, "I was there with my wife." *But I wasn't.*

"Well, then, what's the problem?"

"No problem," I answered. Then I said it again, "No problem."

I hung up the phone and just sat there. A few minutes later Abby walked by my office. She paused and, raising her hands and turning them into claws, mouthed the word, "*Boo.*"

I was busy the rest of the day, up until I had to leave at a little before seven for my therapist appointment uptown. I considered telling Dr. Schwartz about all this, how strange it had seemed and how odd it had made me feel—the voicemail, the email, the woman from Bobo—but as I rode the subway to the Upper West Side, I decided not to. It seemed a silly thing to want to discuss. Instead, I spent the session talking about the usual: my feelings as a new father, the stress of trying to juggle my career and home life. In response, Dr. Schwartz followed his usual routine: nodded a bit and asked me how I felt about my feelings.

By the time I got home it was after nine. Zachery had already been put down for the night and I was sad to have missed him. On my way to our room to change into some jeans and a T-shirt—downstairs I could hear Grainne popping some leftover pasta in the microwave for me—I looked in on Zachery. He was sleeping soundly, curled on his side and wearing pajamas that had the faces of frogs on the feet. I ate my dinner standing up, in the kitchen, leaning against the counter. Grainne kept me company and even joined me in a glass

of red wine. I told her about my day and she told me about hers. When I was finished with the pasta, I went to the study and Grainne settled herself on the couch for one of her ten o'clock shows.

I opened up my laptop and then turned on some quiet music to help drown out the TV in the other room. Just as I was re-reading what I'd written over the weekend, the phone rang. I froze, my fingers hovering above the laptop. I let Grainne answer it and, when she didn't call out my name, I figured it wasn't for me. I continued to write until Grainne swept into the room a half-hour later and enveloped me in a hug that was touching and confusing. I could tell she'd been crying.

"Hey," I said into her hair as she held me tight. I felt her tears go straight through my T-shirt, soaking my chest. "What's the matter?"

She told me that it had been Heather on the phone, an old college friend I'd met a few times. She'd had a miscarriage a few days earlier. They'd gone to the doctor for a checkup and there wasn't a heartbeat. It had been fairly early in the pregnancy, that point where—in just another few days—she would have been safely out of the woods (the first trimester; the longest three months of a woman's life). She was just going to begin telling friends and family about the news. She even had a ticket to come to New York in another week in order to tell Grainne in person. She had planned a whole day around the event. Brunch, then a matinee, and finally drinks. The centerpiece of the day was going to be news of the latest child (she already had a daughter named Isabella). But then disaster struck and instead of Heather flying to see Grainne, the reverse was requested.

"How long will you be gone for?"

"Hopefully not too long," Grainne said as she sniffled. "Most of the week, I guess. Maybe through the weekend, too."

Grainne contemplated leaving Zachery with me while she was gone, but Heather said she didn't mind if Grainne brought him along (Isabella was just about his age; they could play together).

"I'll be back before our anniversary next week," she said, still holding me tight.

"Don't you worry about that."

"Yes, our anniversary." I said this in a strong voice that hopefully conveyed that I hadn't forgotten about it even though I had. "What do you want to do for it?"

"Oh, nothing," she said in a sigh. "When I get back I'll be tired and cranky after having been away, so let's just relax and order in. Okay?"

It sounded fine with me, so I just nodded.

"Maybe some Indian food from Satish Palace? Chicken tikka masala and saag paneer?"

Indian food wasn't my favorite, but I continued to nod.

"As long as you get some extra garlic naan, I'm on board."

Grainne laughed, but then turned serious.

"It's just," she began to speak, but the words trailed off. "I'm worried."

"About what?"

"That you'll turn back into a bachelor." She chuckled as she said this but there was an edge in her voice that showed she was serious. We'd worked so hard to get where we were; we'd been through so much to get Zachery. It felt like we'd climbed a huge mountain and Grainne wanted to make sure we didn't slip and end up right back where we'd started: two separate people standing in front of a mountain. "I'm worried that you'll go back to being who you used to be, before we met."

"That's not possible."

I kissed her.

“It is,” she said, “but I hope it doesn’t happen.”

I slept poorly that night. Grainne had stayed up late packing and when she finally came to bed she tossed and turned and kept me awake. When her alarm went off at five so she could shower and get Zachery ready for the car service that was coming at six, it felt like I hadn’t been asleep at all. I kissed her and Zachery goodbye with bloodshot eyes.

My morning was busy with meetings, so it wasn’t until lunch that I was able to sit down at my desk to check my email. There weren’t many new or important messages at my work account, but in my Mac account—the one I used for personal correspondence—I had a notice from American Express. They wanted to verify a recent purchase. Glancing at the amount on the screen, it didn’t seem to match anything I’d bought in the last month or so. I logged on to their website in order to investigate further.

“If it’s for dinner at Bobo,” I said to myself, “I’m going to be pissed.”

The transaction that had been flagged was a \$600 charge from a Bed, Bath and Beyond on the Upper West Side. This was odd since I hadn’t been to that location for years, ever since Grainne and I lived together on Seventy-seventh Street. Since moving from the Upper West Side four years ago, I never went to that neighborhood except to see Dr. Schwartz.

I called American Express to try and figure out where the charge had come from. After punching in my account number, I was transferred to an “account specialist.” When a female finally answered, after eight minutes of Muzak, she repeated back to me the details of the charge I’d seen online.

“This must be some mistake,” I said.

“I’m sorry, sir, but Jeff Gomez made this charge. And you’re Jeff Gomez.”

“Well then, it must be for *another* Jeff Gomez.”

“That may be so.” I could hear more typing through the phone. “In order to confirm your identity, can you please tell me the last four digits of your Social Security number?”

I sighed, about to protest, but finally relented and said quickly, “2-3-74.”

A few seconds passed as she checked my file.

“Yes, sir. That is it. I am positive this is your account.”

While we were talking, she emailed to me a scan of the credit card slip. It was a bit blurry from being blown up so much, but it certainly looked like my signature. After I hung up, I didn’t know what to think. Was it a mistake or identity theft? Was this charge for a different Jeff Gomez or was someone pretending to be me, and which was worse? And was this tied to the glitch with the email and voicemail, and were those two things connected to the Jeff Gomez sighting at Bobo?

Turning back to my computer, I Googled the Bed, Bath and Beyond on the Upper West Side, scribbling down the phone number on a Post-It. I called and, after asking to speak to the manager, was connected to someone who sounded not much older than Zachery. His name was Chip, and since the manager and the assistant manager were out to lunch, he was in charge. I told him the situation and he asked for my credit card number. As I told it to him, I could hear him punching the numbers into a computer.

“Okay,” he said, “looks like they charged a bunch of stuff. Let’s see...inflatable mattress, some dishes, a side table, a lamp. Um—a blanket, some sheets. That’s it.”

This all seemed rather benign and random. Wouldn’t someone stealing my identity go for bigger and more expensive items than these? Flat screen TVs or a car or, at the very

least, a drunken binge? I was about to hang up when Chip said, “Oh, and there’s one more charge.”

“For how much?”

“Fifteen dollars.”

“What for?”

“It looks like it was a delivery.”

Outside my office a few co-workers were coming back from lunch, talking loudly and laughing. I covered my ears, trying to drown out the noise.

“Can you tell me the address?”

Through the phone I heard typing.

“Let me see. Looks like it’s 129 West Seventy-third Street. Apartment 4F.”

I wrote down the address on the Post-It note. I thanked him and then hung up. Then I just sat there, staring at the address. It didn’t mean anything to me but the fact that I had it—that I could conceivably track down whoever was doing this—spooked me. I then went to the Chase website to make sure nothing was wrong with my checking account.

The first thing I noticed was that my balance was lower than it should have been. I clicked on *Recent Activity* and saw that a check for \$5,200 had just been cashed. Clicking on the amount, a photocopy of the check popped up in a new window. It was indeed one of my checks, and the writing and signature seemed to be authentically mine. It was dated this past Sunday and was made out to Tegmark Real Estate, LLC. Written in the memo section, in my own chicken-scratch printing, it said, *Security deposit and first months rent, Wakefield apartments, NYC.*

I Googled “Wakefield apartment NYC” and the first listing that came up was for the website of what I guessed was the parent company, Tegmark Real Estate. I followed a link

for tegmarkrealestate.com. The page had a large black-and-white logo in the corner that featured an illustration of a number of New York landmarks. Underneath this was the slogan, “Your next home is only a click away.” After clicking on the *properties* tag, I scrolled through a number of high-rise buildings in Manhattan, both uptown and downtown. It seemed the Wakefield was a newly refurbished apartment building on the Upper West Side, on Seventy-third Street between Columbus and Amsterdam.

“That’s right near Dr. Schwartz’s office,” I said out loud but under my breath.

In addition to the check for \$5,200 there were also a couple of cash withdrawals from ATM units on the Upper West Side, as well as a couple of charges from Pioneer Foods, an ancient grocery store on Columbus that I remembered from back when Grainne and I lived on Seventy-seventh Street near the museum of natural history.

“What the *fuck*,” I said again, but this time actually loud.

I examined the check more closely. It was from my personal account, but the address was from the apartment in Hoboken Grainne and I lived in right before we had Zachery, the place we moved to after moving out of Manhattan. I no longer had any of those checks, so they couldn’t have been recently stolen. This made me somewhat comfortable. If someone had indeed stolen my identity, they had stolen it from a couple of years ago. It didn’t explain the other charges, or the American Express bill, but I let that go for now.

I had enough money in my account to cover the phantom charges—none of them were going to bankrupt me—so rather than call the bank and cancel my card and freeze the account (which would have screwed up a bunch of bills that I paid automatically) I decided to keep an eye on things over the next couple of days, seeing if I couldn’t get to the bottom of this mystery by myself.

•

“Who the fuck is Leah?”

It was Grainne calling from Philadelphia. Before I could ask her anything about how she and Zachery were doing, or when she was coming home, that’s what she blurted out. I’d been sitting on the couch, enjoying my quiet Saturday listening to the radio and reading *The Economist*. When I didn’t initially respond, she repeated the question. “I said, *who* is Leah?”

“What? I don’t know. What Leah?”

“That’s what *I* want to know.” Her voice was very deep and very serious. “That’s what I’m asking *you*.”

“Grainne, what’s going on? You sound weird.”

“Well, *Jeff*.” She emphasized my name in an ironic way, as if I may have been sketchy on names but she certainly wasn’t. “You would sound weird, too, if you’d just seen your husband’s Facebook page after being out of town for a couple of days, only to see a bunch of status updates about some slut named *Leah*.”

I burst out laughing and expected Grainne to join me. She didn’t.

“Grainne, you know I hate Facebook.” I spoke quickly, as if the faster I talked the faster I could solve this mess. “I haven’t updated my status for weeks. Months, maybe.”

“Oh, really? Well, listen to this. Here are a few *gems* from the past week or so. From *your* page. Let’s see. ‘Getting ready for dinner at Bobo with Leah.’ ‘Dinner last week was great. Leah wore a red dress and looked amazing.’ ‘Ordered pizza and watched *Shadow of a Doubt*. Joseph Cotton is a god.’ ‘Had a good run, three laps around the Reservoir.’ ‘Chinese food tonight with Leah, can’t wait.’ And the icing on the cake is that, under relationships, it says *single*. Care to, uh, explain?”



“Wait—wait.” An idea was forming; a connection was made. “Wasn’t Anne’s Facebook account hacked? Her status update said she’d been mugged in London but she wasn’t actually *in* London at the time?”

Grainne, absentmindedly: “It was something like that.”

“Well, that must be what’s happening here.”

“Jeff, no. This isn’t a hacker. This is *you*. *You* like Hitchcock, I don’t think Nigerian Princes do.”

Lamely, hopefully, I replied, “They might?”

Grainne growled.

“Babe, babe, *listen* to me. This is messed up but it’s not me. I don’t know anyone named Leah and I didn’t change my status, I *swear*. It must be, it must be,” I paused, trying to think of what it must be. There was just a blank. Also, something clicked. *Bobo?* I finally said, “Wait a second, let me take a look. Let me see.”

“Okay, but don’t try and palm this off on some *other* Jeff Gomez. There’s *your* picture at the top of the page, there’s *your* dumb George Orwell quote, and those are *our* photos from our trip to Venice, the one where you sat in that throne in the Guggenheim garden looking like a goddamn idiot.”

This was going downhill very fast. I went to my Facebook page; I couldn’t remember the last time I was there. On my wall were a number strange status updates from the past couple of weeks, ones other than the half-dozen or so Grainne had read.

“Look, Grainne, I don’t know what’s happening but, come on, I wouldn’t be that big of an idiot. Half of my friends on Facebook are your friends. Some of them are your relatives for chrissakes. Do you think I really think that they *wouldn’t* think it was a little weird and would then go and tell you? If I were having an affair, I’d be posting stuff like ‘Went out

for beers with Matthew' or something like that, but instead I'd meet Leah at her place...or in a hotel room."

I slowly realized that was the wrong thing to say.

"*Jeff*." Grainne said this in a voice that in an old movie about Southern women would have conveyed, *Well, I never*.

"Forget that. That was dumb. But really, I swear to god I have no idea who this Leah person is. I don't even think I've ever met one in my life, and I *promise* to you I'm not having an affair. Not now, not ever. Okay? Please *please* believe me."

There was silence. I'd momentarily won her back to my side. This was good since there were plenty of other unsavory things to discuss.

"Listen, sweetie, there's something else we need to worry about."

"Like what?" Her voice sounded hard; I was losing her again.

"Financial stuff. There have been some charges made to a few of my credit cards. And some checks have been cashed."

"Someone got hold of our checks? Jeff, how could this have happened? I've told you a million times—"

"My checks, Grainne," I cut her off. "*My* checks. Okay? They're not going to get into our account and suck all our money out, I promise. Everything's going to be fine."

"But Jeff, this is serious."

"I know it is, Gran, that's why I'm working to get it all sorted out."

"And how, exactly, are you going to do that?"

"Tomorrow I'm going to go to where some of the charges have been made and do some snooping around. If someone's trying to steal my identity or, I don't know, impersonating me, maybe I can track him down before it gets out of hand."

“Oh, my god.” She sounded worried again. “You’re going to try and bust up some counterfeit identity ring?”

“Grainne, it couldn’t be a *counterfeit* identity ring, now could it? What would be the point of stealing *fake* identities?” This idea captured my attention for a few seconds. Could you steal someone’s alter ego? Could you be for real what someone else only pretended to be?

“Whatever, Jeff, you *know* what I mean. I don’t want you thinking that you’re Philip Marlowe or someone like that, going around busting into a boiler room filled with a bunch of gangsters.”

“Don’t worry about me, Dollface.” I slurred my words in a very mediocre Bogart impression. “I’ll be okay.”

“Jeff, I’m *serious*.”

I went back to my regular voice.

“I am, too, sweetie. I won’t do anything stupid.”

“Promise?”

I hesitated before answering, “Promise.”

The next afternoon I went into Manhattan, taking the 1 train to Sixty-sixth Street. I hit the Barnes and Noble that’s right near Lincoln Center, looking to see if they had any good books on identity theft. I didn’t find anything too useful, so I left and started walking up to where that building should be on Seventy-third Street.

As I passed Sixty-eighth Street, I saw—out of the corner of my eye—someone who looked a lot like me. He was wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and a black digital watch. But none of

this registered until I was a few steps past where he'd been standing in the middle of the block staring across the street at a hotel I'd never seen before. I blinked, thinking that I was seeing things. When I looked down at my watch—I was wearing one just like his—I noticed it was flashing twelve o'clock. I shook off the growing paranoia and kept heading north. At Seventy-third I turned right and, as soon as I did, I could see an awning announcing the Wakefield.

It was a nice building but nothing special. The Upper West Side was filled with lots of apartment buildings like this. Across the street there were brownstones. On the corner there was a bodega. Farther down the block there were a few restaurants and what looked like a dry cleaner. Pretty routine.

I walked into the lobby and the doorman approached. He seemed to know me.

“Hey, Mr. Gomez, you forget something?”

“Why—why do you say that?”

“Well,” he said in a thick Bronx accent, “seeing as how you just left here ten minutes ago I figured maybe you forgot something.”

“Yeah, I guess I did.” I tried to play along, but nothing came to me. “It’s just...”

The doorman looked puzzled. He stared at me and I didn’t know my next move, so I just stared back.

“Maybe you should just go upstairs and lie down. Catch your breath or something?”

I continued to stare, pausing only to pat down my pants pockets. If I were going to lie down in an apartment, I’d have to get into it first.

“Keys,” I blurted out.

“Oh, your *keys*.” The doorman slapped his forehead. He was wearing a short-sleeved version of what must have been, in the winter, a very majestic blazer. “No problem, Mr.

Gomez. I'll get Jake to let you in. No problem at all." He patted me on the shoulders, trying to comfort me. "You don't worry about a thing. He'll be up there in a jiffy."

"Jake?" I repeated. "Jiffy?" I said.

I moved toward the elevators. There were two of them. The one on the left arrived first and expelled a couple about my age. I didn't recognize them and they didn't seem to recognize me. How long had the other Jeff Gomez lived here? The doorman seemed to know me, but so far no one else did. When I paused after entering the elevator, and then froze, the doorman helped me out.

"Fourth floor, Mr. Gomez. Remember? *Fourth* floor. And don't worry, Jake'll be up in two minutes."

The hallway on the fourth floor held a dozen doors, six on each side. I wondered how I could possibly be connected to any of them.

I was fishing around in my pocket for the Post-It note with the apartment number when the elevator arrived and an older guy wearing jeans, a denim work shirt, and a tool belt got off.

"You Jake?"

"Good one, Mr. Gomez," he said as he walked down the hallway. He drew a key from an enormous keyring attached to his work belt and let me into 4F. "You need anything," he said as he retreated down the hallway, "you just holler."

The apartment was small; it was just a studio. It was even smaller than the one I'd lived in on Ninety-sixth Street before I met Grainne. There was an inflatable mattress on the floor, a cheap bedside table, a few clothes scattered about, and an iPod tucked into a set of portable speakers that matched a set I had at home. In the small kitchenette there were only a couple of dishes: plate, glass, coffee cup. One fork, one spoon, one knife. I opened the

fridge and didn't find much: some leftover pizza and Chinese food, a six-pack of beer, the ingredients for a turkey sandwich. In the bathroom I noticed a few toiletries. The closet was empty and there wasn't a dresser.

Right beside one of the two windows that looked onto Seventy-third Street was a cheap office chair. The view out the window looked directly into the third-floor apartment of one the brownstones across the street. I couldn't see the entire apartment, but what I could see shocked me. It looked like my living room back in Montclair. It was the same exact television, entertainment center, and bookshelves. The only things missing were Zachery's toys strewn everywhere and a new carpet we'd bought from Pottery Barn six months ago. This spooked me so much I had to sit down. As I did I spotted a pair of opera glasses on the windowsill sitting atop a paperback book. It was a novel. *The High Window* by Raymond Chandler.

This all seemed to me like some strange, elaborate joke. The opera glasses were the same as I pair that I owned, and most of the items in the studio matched what had been purchased under my name at Bed, Bath and Beyond a week ago. I couldn't help but laugh. Nervous, paranoid laughter.

As I was laughing, I picked up the book and looked at it. On the back was a sepia-tinged picture of two windows. On the front was a cropped photo of an apartment building that looked an awful lot like the Wakefield. As I began to flip through the book, it opened instantly to page 66. Still shaking with frightened laughter my eyes quickly zeroed in on a short, one-sentence paragraph near the bottom of the page: *He was laughing.*

I threw the book onto the floor and got up fast from the chair. I backed out of the apartment and ran down the stairs two at a time. In the lobby the doorman was dealing with a delivery guy and didn't see me leave. I didn't know what else to do or investigate, so I

sprinted down Seventy-third, took the subway to Penn Station, and caught a train back to Montclair.

On Tuesday, even though I was a bit freaked out about what happened over the weekend in the Wakefield, I came back to the neighborhood in order to keep my appointment with Dr. Schwartz. During the session I tried to talk about the usual things, but I was distant and distracted and Dr. Schwartz picked up on this. When he asked, three times during the hour, “Jeff, is anything *wrong?*” I lied and chalked it up to the fact that Grainne and Zachery being out of town had left me unmoored. All of my routines, no matter how I sometimes felt smothered by them, had been derailed and this left me feeling adrift. Dr. Schwartz listened to all of this and merely nodded. When the hour was up, I headed straight home.

I slept uneasily that night, eventually dropping off around three. I was a wreck when morning finally arrived. I was groggy and my eyes were surrounded by purple pools of sagging skin. My hands shook as I poured a cup of coffee. As soon as I got to the office, I Googled the Wakefield and looked at the neighborhood through Google Earth, scrutinizing the satellite image as if that could solve my mystery. All of the buildings and streets seemed to interlock like a jigsaw puzzle, fitting neatly together, but the whole picture wasn't apparent until I zoomed all the way out and saw nothing but the earth.

Thursday was slow and I was able to concentrate on various projects. When it came time for lunch, I considered ordering in and having my assistant go down to the lobby to get it when it arrived. I was about to go online to check the menu for Olive's, over on Prince, when the phone rang.

“Hi there, I’m calling from Amanda’s.” It was a female’s voice. In the background I could hear conversation and the clinking of dishes. “I’m confirming your reservation for tonight.”

The words she said all made sense, but I couldn’t quite comprehend what she was saying.

“What? Reservation for who?”

“Uh, for *you*. I mean, for two, for tonight at eight o’clock. For Gomez.”

“Who is this again?”

“Amanda’s restaurant. In Hoboken.”

“Oh, Hoboken. Yeah, I remember. On Washington, right?”

She was silent. I’d obviously pushed this conversation longer than it usually lasted and she no longer had a script to follow.

“That’s correct, sir. Is there a problem?”

“No, no,” I said, the pieces finally falling into place. “I’m sorry. My wife must have made the reservation. As a surprise. Tonight’s our anniversary.”

“Oh, I hope I didn’t ruin the surprise.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I’ll play dumb when she mentions it. Besides, it’s her fault for giving you my number instead of hers.”

After we hung up I called Olive’s and ordered lunch. Just as I was finishing my sandwich, Grainne called. The plan for later today had been that I was going to leave work early, pick up her car at the train station, and then drive down to Newark to pick them up. Her shuttle flight from Philadelphia was scheduled to get in at a bit after six. After that I guess a baby sitter was going to show up and then we’d drive to Hoboken for dinner at Amanda’s.



“Listen,” Grainne said right after I’d said hello, “I’ve got some bad news. I’m going to be stuck in Philadelphia for a few more days. At least until Saturday. I can’t make it home for our anniversary.”

“Wait, *what?* Why not?”

“The flights, babe. They’ve all been cancelled. Everything in and out of the tri-state area. It’s that huge storm.”

I looked out my office and could see golden sunshine pouring in, creating long shadows that fell upon the cubicles and office walls in what looked like layers.

“Storm, what storm? It’s gorgeous here.”

“Jeff, *stop* it. This isn’t the time for jokes. I’m watching CNN right now and they’re showing footage from Long Island and Queens. Boats are keeling over and drivers are stuck in floods on the roads. In New Jersey it’s practically a hurricane. They’re calling it Katrina: The Sequel.”

“Who is?”

“What?”

“*Who’s* calling it that.”

“Oh,” she paused briefly, “let’s see... Wolf Blitzer, Diane Sawyer. The black guy on NBC who used to be fat.”

“Grainne,” I laughed, “is this a joke? Is this because of that Leah person? Are you still mad at me?”

“Jeff, look online. You’ll see. It’s the top story of the *Times*.”

“Okay, give me a second.” I turned to my computer and clicked on the bookmark for *The New York Times*. The top story was about a bomb that went off in the parking lot of a

newly opened Sunni marketplace. There was no mention of a storm. “Gran, stop it. This is bullshit. There’s *nothing* online about this. Nothing.”

“I don’t know what to tell you, Jeff.” She sounded exhausted. It must have been a tough trip and I wasn’t making it any better. “Look, I mean, *listen*.” She held her cell phone to the window in order to let the sound of all that rain pour into the mouthpiece. It sounded like the crinkling of tissue paper. I looked again out the floor-to-ceiling windows lining the second floor of my office building; there was nothing but sun.

“Sorry, sweetie, but that’s not convincing me.”

“Fine,” she said. “Hang on.”

Grainne’s voice disappeared for a second and was replaced by various background noises and then the artificial shutter-click sound of her cell phone. I could then hear her fingers typing in my email address on the tiny keyboard. A few seconds later my computer beeped; the photo she’d beamed first to space and then back down to earth had arrived on my desktop. It took millions of years of evolution and hundreds of years of technological breakthroughs in order to make this small thing happen.

“Hang on, I just got your email.”

“Open it.” She sounded a bit mad. “You’ll see.”

I clicked on the email. There was no message, just an attachment.

The photo showed Grainne, looking not very happy, posing in front of a window in Heather’s kitchen. Behind her I could see a dark sky filled with clouds. The windows were soaked with rain, beaded up and dripping down. This was turning into a bad kidnapping movie; I uttered the standard dialogue. “That could have been taken any time.”

“Jeff, seriously, stop it.”

I didn't speak and neither did she. I could hear her phantom storm; thunder and rain against the pane of glass she'd just posed in front of.

"Well," I finally said, "I guess we're not going to need those reservations for Amanda's."

"For where?"

"For Amanda's. That restaurant in Hoboken we used to go to. They called earlier to confirm for tonight at eight. I didn't make the reservation so I assumed you did. As a surprise."

I could now hear Zachery begin to cry, gently at first but it soon escalated into one of his bouts of full-blown wailing.

"Look, Jeff, I have to go. I'm sorry to miss our anniversary but there's nothing I can do. Okay? I love you. Bye."

"Grainne, wait—"

"Tomorrow, we'll talk tomorrow."

I was about to hang up when I heard Grainne add, "Oh, and Jeff? I didn't make any reservation for Amanda's."

"Wait," I said just as the line went dead. I hung up the phone.

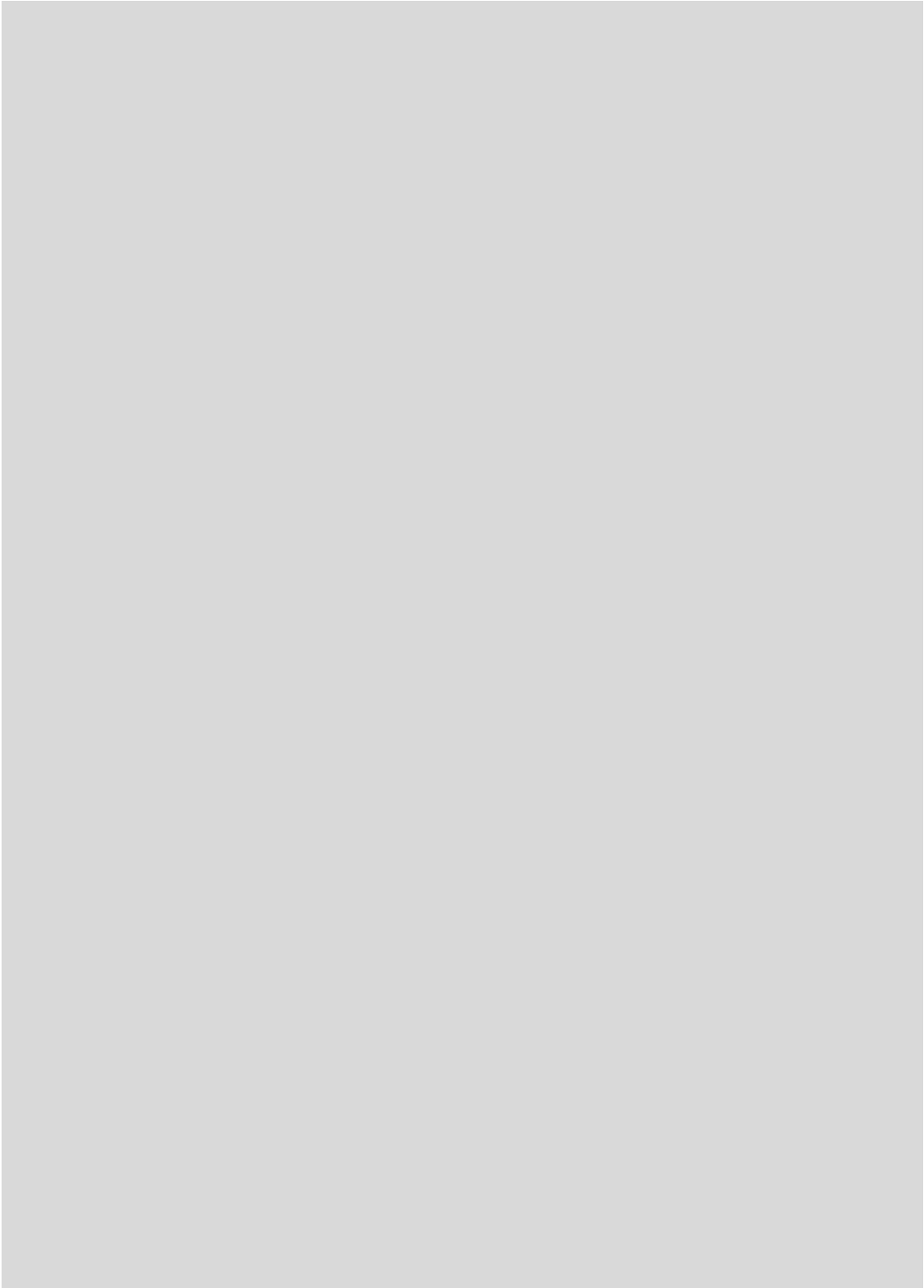
Something didn't feel right. If Grainne hadn't made the reservation, and I hadn't either, then who did? I began to think that it was somehow connected to the other strange events that had happened recently. Was my doppelganger beginning to steal my history and not just my credit cards? If I went out to Amanda's tonight, would I find him sitting in a booth wearing a blue-checked shirt, convincing some poor girl that he was the one who'd written *Our Noise* and *Geniuses of Crack*? Having nothing better to do, I decided to go and find out.

•

It took me longer than usual to drive down to Hoboken. I had hoped to get there early so I could stake out the entrance and get a good view of everyone going in and out of the restaurant, but traffic heading into the Lincoln Tunnel had thwarted that plan. I didn't hit Washington Street until well past eight. By the time I approached Tenth Street I could see, from the large two-faced clock that stood right outside the restaurant, that it was 8:12. My plan had been to find a parking space somewhere along Washington and then get a table for one at Amanda's and see if I could spot my double. Instead, it was already past eight and I was stuck behind three cars at the stoplight at Ninth Street. That's when I saw him.

Standing near the clock—or rather, it looked like he was trying to hide behind it—was a figure whose silhouette looked strangely familiar. He was tall, kind of thin, and was wearing jeans and a shirt with the sleeves rolled up. The face of a black digital wristwatch—worn on his right hand—reflected light from a nearby streetlamp. He had dark hair, though not much of it. It was hard to tell how tall he was since he was hunched over, trying to appear inconspicuous although that behavior just made him stand out more. I then realized that this person was me; I was looking at myself.

I was stunned but managed to shake it off and tried to focus in on what the Jeff on the street was looking at. I followed the direction of his gaze and it led into the restaurant. In the window, in the second section of the restaurant—sitting in a booth that overlooked the street—I again saw myself. This version of me was sitting with Grainne. We were dressed nicely and smiling. Zachery was nowhere to be found. I seemed to be initiating a toast. Right after the glasses met, and they each took a sip, the driver behind me leaned on his horn. I don't know how long the light had been green, but it must have been awhile.



ON FRIDAY MORNING, as I was heading into the office, I checked my iPhone and saw that Dr. Schwartz had sent me an urgent email the night before.

*From: tedsbrinker@gmail.com*

*Subject: Emergency session*

*Date: October 1, 2009 11:48 PM EST*

*To: jeff.gomez@mac.com*

*Jeff,*

*I know this is last minute, but please come to my office tomorrow at 9AM. This is an emergency.*

*Thanks.*

It was odd, but given everything else that had been happening lately—especially after last night at Amanda’s—it seemed to make sense. So I went straight to Dr. Schwartz’s instead of to work.

Dr. Schwartz’s office was actually just an apartment he’d converted into an office. Whenever I walked down the hallway of the fifth floor of his building, seeing the umbrellas on the doormats on rainy days or the Greenpeace stickers on the doors, it reminded me that ordinary people lived beyond these walls. And since my appointment was always for 7:10 at night, when I entered the apartment or left an hour later I would smell in the hallway the aromas of the various dinners being prepared. Conversations also escaped, and it made me wonder if—like in that Woody Allen movie *Another Woman*—people in the adjacent apartments could hear me during my sessions. Did the tenants of the fifth floor overhear little bits of my life the way I’d overheard little bits of theirs?

When I got to the door I rang the bell. There was the usual gap of a few seconds between my ringing and Dr. Schwartz buzzing me in. I walked into the apartment, expecting to see the usual set-up: the blue chair in the short hallway, the magazines on the table sitting next to the coat rack and, beyond this, a bathroom I’d never had the need to use. But on that day something was different. Someone was in the blue plastic chair. I paused for a second, thinking that maybe I was early and that this was his last patient; I’d walked in on the tail end of their session. But then I focused on the figure in the chair and, to my amazement, discovered that it was me.

Before either of us could say anything, Dr. Schwartz appeared at the door to the main room and said, “I’m glad you’re both here. I think you had better join us.” Through the cracked door I could see yet another version of me sitting on the couch—his legs crossed—

wearing jeans and a button-down shirt which I also own. A black Adidas was nervously wiggling back and forth.

I suddenly realized that the previous evening had not been either a mirage or a hallucination. What I'd seen was somehow real: we had all been in Hoboken last night and there were now three Jeff Gomezes in Dr. Schwartz's office.

"Wait," I said. It was all I could say. I wanted more time; I wanted desperately to hit *pause* on life.

"Just sit down, Jeff," Dr. Schwartz said, calmly.

I sat down in the green chair I always sat in. The Jeff who had been in the blue plastic chair in the foyer sat at the wooden chair tucked into the desk in the corner. As I leaned back, I touched elbows for a second with the Jeff on the couch; the sensation was unreal. The flesh felt like when I touch my own, but there was nothing on the other side of the experience. It was just the surface.

I was afraid to look to my left or right. I was afraid to say anything. The other two men seemed to be in the same situation. We were all petrified. No one knew what to say or how to start. There was just silence. After a minute or so of quiet, Dr. Schwartz finally spoke up.

"Let me say, first of all, *Jeffs*, thank you for coming."

There was again silence. Finally, one of us spoke: "But how did you know?" "Well," Dr. Schwartz began, looking to the floor instead of at us. "I became suspicious last week. I had a patient named Jeff Gomez show up for three different appointments—from Tuesday to Thursday—even though he was only scheduled for one. And yet even though it was ostensibly the same person, during each appointment there was something fundamentally different about each of their—*your*—lives." Dr. Schwartz paused, and then looked at each of



us. “One of you was single and lived around the corner from this office. One of you was married and lived in Hoboken. And another one of you had a son and lived with your wife in Montclair. You were all *you* and yet, obviously, you all *weren't*.”

He let this soak in.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” I said.

I nodded in agreement.

“Wait a second, so who lives on Seventy-third Street?” I asked.

“I do,” I said.

“I do, too...sort of,” I said.

Confused, I said, “I went to an apartment building. Big. Called the Wakefield. The doorman had some guy let me in. It was a small little studio apartment that looked like a terrorist was squatting there.”

“That’s my place,” I said. “It’s just a temporary thing.”

Dr. Schwartz looked like he was going to speak again before one of us cut him off.

“Wait, which of you has a kid?”

“Me.”

Another one of the Jeffs sulked and said with an edge, “So, she finally talked you into it, huh?”

“She didn’t ‘talk me into it,’” I said. “I wanted to start a family. So did she.”

“Yeah, right.”

“No, really. I mean, maybe not at first, but when—”

As Jeff was talking, Dr. Schwartz slowly grabbed a small yellow pad. For the first time since I began seeing him, he began to take notes. I was chilled that this was what it took to really get his attention. While he was scribbling, I asked, slowly, “What’s the kid’s name?”

I didn't want to respond.

"Zachery," I finally replied. "With an E-R-Y."

"Nice," I said, grinning. "Like ours."

"Beautiful," I nearly cried.

"Do you have pictures?"

"Yeah, I'd love to see—"

But Dr. Schwartz broke in and tried to keep us on some sort of track.

"Guys, guys—please. I know this an emotional time but I really think we have bigger things to worry about."

"Than fucking *what?*" I said this very loudly; it was almost a shout. Only the tears welling in my eyes made me stop short. "More important than seeing a picture of a son I didn't know I had?"

I felt a hand on my arm; my hand. Those long, bony fingers I'd watched all my life touching other things were now touching me.

"You *didn't* have him. I did. Or rather, my Grainne did."

I was chilled yet again. If there were three versions of me, did that mean there were three versions of her, too?

"Dr. Schwartz," I said, on edge, "what's happening? Are we clones?"

He considered this. "No, not necessarily."

"Why not?" I asked. "What else could we be?"

"You each, somehow," Dr. Schwartz began, "have your own world. You're not clones all running around in the same world. At least, you hadn't been until now. And it's not just your lives that are different. You inhabit entire worlds that are all your own. You're

certainly not identical twins. Or rather, triplets. You're..." Dr. Schwartz searched for the right word.

"Alternates?"

"More like," he answered slowly, "*alternatives.*"

"Wait a second," I said, remembering a website I'd read about on Gawker a week or so ago called You're Familiar. "I saw this new social networking site, sort of a more specialized version of Facebook. Gawker said it was supposed to be for split personalities or something like that. I couldn't tell if it was real or a joke. When I clicked on the link in the article, there was this weird landing page that said 'A website for all of you' and had some trick photography of three different versions of the same guy. Was that—was that for *this*?"

Dr. Schwartz nodded slowly and then said, "It's more common than you think."

"You mean this happens to other people, too? It's happened before?"

"Yes, of course." Dr. Schwartz shrugged his shoulders in a nonchalant way. The gesture seemed to say, *You thought you were so special?*

"But how can that happen?"

He shrugged again.

"I don't know. No one does. After all," he waved his hand at the three of us, "how did *this* happen?"

"Wait a second," I said, raising my hands in a *time-out* gesture. "This website, I don't get it. What is it for?"

"It began by word of mouth," Dr. Schwartz said, "as sort of a private club. It was started here in New York. The founder is a guy named Luther Blissett. Mainly, I think, it was formed just to see how many cases like this existed. Same as with you, whenever it's happened in the past people think they're the only ones. Or two or three." He stopped to

chuckle at his own joke, but none of us laughed. “Since then it’s sort of evolved into a social networking site like any other. It has message boards, chat rooms, tips on how to handle the condition, stuff like that. I also think it comes in handy for communication between the various selves, keeping track of who’s doing what and where.”

He stopped for a second, as if trying to gauge the level of confusion in the room. We were still pretty new to this and he didn’t want to take us too far too soon.

“Beyond that,” he continued, “I can’t really say much more. I’ve heard about it secondhand from a colleague but I’ve never actually seen the site, other than the same home page that you saw. No one who isn’t in your predicament can be a member, and they’ve gotten more strict after getting fooled by a couple cases of Photoshop.”

“How many people like this are out there?” I asked. “Multiples or alternatives, I mean?”

“Well, I’m not sure. But in your case you each seem like the product of a decision you did or didn’t make. A turn you took in life.” He pointed to the me on the couch and said, “You went down one road.” Then he pointed to the me in the green chair and said, “And you went down another road.” He pointed finally to the me sitting on the wooden chair with his back to the desk and said, “You went down yet another. You’re all still *you* but you’re all leading different lives. You’re all the product of the decisions you made that got you each to different places.”

“Paths,” I said slowly.

“Borges,” another Jeff said.

“Yes, right. The garden, the forking paths.”

“Look,” Dr. Schwartz said before pausing to push his glasses onto his forehead. “I don’t know how often this occurs, or what causes it. But something happens to the decisions

we don't make. The people we could have been are out there. The way our lives may have been *already are*. They're happening this very second. Each of you is proof of that."

I felt something against my leg and looked down and saw that it was my leg, but from one of the other Jeffs. Looking up, I saw my own face staring intently at Dr. Schwartz. It was an odd feeling, like looking in a mirror only the face in the mirror wasn't doing what my face was doing. I frowned comically but the face I was staring at—*my* face—stayed still. Before turning back to Dr. Schwartz, I noticed that this other Jeff had bags under his eyes the same way I did. I had shaved this morning, but he hadn't.

"So then, what about *us*," I said. "Theories aside, what do we *do*?"

Dr. Schwartz furrowed his brow and then wrapped both arms around his chest.

"I don't know," he replied after a few seconds of silence and contemplation. His voice was quieter than I'd ever heard it. "For now you'd all better just lay low. Don't stray from your normal routines. Go to your various homes and try to act normal."

The three of us looked at each other; the experience was not unlike being in a three-way mirror. One of me said, "But *then* what?"

"We'll meet back here," Dr. Schwartz said, "same time. Next Friday."

"Fine," I said.

"Wait a second," I said. "What about until then?"

"Yeah, next week."

"Yeah, what's our schedule look like—"

"—what are we all doing?"

"Yeah, we can't all just—"

"—show up to the Monday morning staff meeting."

At that moment we each—simultaneously—pulled an iPhone out of our pants pocket and opened the calendar, seeing what we had scheduled that week. The casualness of this amused me. It was as if we were blithely checking to see if lunch or drinks would work with an old friend.

“Well,” I said, flipping through the days of the week with my finger, “next week I’ve got a conference to go to in California.”

“What, you do?” I asked.

“Fuck, *yes*, the UGC conference. I *almost* went to that.”

“I fly out on Monday. The conference is Tuesday and Wednesday. I fly back on Thursday.”

“Okay,” Dr. Schwartz said. “*You*,” he pointed to the Jeff on the couch, “will be in California until Thursday. Right? So then you go to the office on Friday, when you’re back in town, after you come in to see me—us—here. Okay, that’s easy enough. Now, *you*,” he pointed at the Jeff sitting in the green chair, “why don’t you go into the office on Tuesday and Wednesday? And finally, *you*,” he pointed at the Jeff sitting in the wooden chair at the desk, “you’ll go into the office on Monday and Thursday.”

Dr. Schwartz leaned back deeply into his chair and sighed, pleased with himself.

“Everybody good?”

Nobody spoke.

“Okay, see you next week. Until then, promise me you’ll stay out of trouble.”

One of me said, “We will.” The other two just nodded.

## 2. Funhouse

AT THE AIRPORT I was paranoid. Every place I looked I thought I saw myself. A security screener, a cab driver, a pilot with his blue suit and gold wings: were they all, somehow, me? I even kept thinking I saw my face on the TVs that were everywhere in the terminal, or else I heard my voice in the background chatter of the various anchors and even the actors in commercials. I was, it seemed, everywhere. Except that I wasn't. It was just an illusion. It was just me being jumpy.

I'd managed to remain more or less calm over the weekend, having my usual Friday night pizza and an old movie and then spending Saturday night at Leah's. She could sense something was wrong, but I managed to convince her I was just tense about work. She was skeptical and tried to follow up on what I'd told her the previous week—about how I was sure I was being followed—but I told her it was nothing.

On Sunday, on my way back from Leah's, I spotted Jeff coming out of the bodega near Seventy-third Street with a handful of groceries. All I did was sort of nod. He nonchalantly nodded back. That night, back in my brownstone, I could see him in the studio



across the street. Walking around, getting dressed, reading by the window instead of staring at me. Every couple of hours I would look to see what he was doing. Every couple of hours I'd catch him doing the same thing.

On the flight to Los Angeles there were two kids in front of me and they occasionally climbed up the back of their seats in order to peer at me. When they did this, I tried to be a good sport, grinning and making a silly face in order to amuse them. I never did a very good job. The two boys always descended looking unsatisfied and vaguely unhappy. This made me think of the other Jeff in Montclair with Zachery. I wondered if he—if *I*—was a good father. I'd never had much exposure to kids or babies, and that had played a part when Grainne and I discussed whether or not to have a child of our own. I had no idea what to do when it came to caring for kids or how to act around them. Would I learn those skills or would I pull that knowledge out from somewhere deep within me? I finally decided it was too much of a risk; there were too many questions I didn't have answers for.

After we landed, I managed to get my bags without any trouble and, unlike when I was back in New York, the airport—thankfully—didn't seem haunted by multiple versions of me. Instead, the faces all looked positively alien. I didn't know a soul and no one's eyes met mine. As I stood on the thin concrete island outside of the terminal and waited for the shuttle to take me to get my rental car, I closed my eyes and soaked up the Southern California sun. It was hot out but despite the heat there was a cool breeze. I could hear, even above the low hum of traffic and the occasional screaming of a jet taking off or landing, the rustling sound the dangling palm fronds made as they blew in the wind. I remembered this sound from my childhood.

Finally the shuttle came and I got on. We didn't pick up any other passengers, so I was the only one on the bus as it pulled out of the terminal and traveled down Century and

Airport Boulevards on its way to the acres of rental car lots that were a few blocks away from the center of the airport. I kept shifting in my seat, looking out the windows in all directions like a tourist, marveling at the palm trees and the mountains and watching the various cars that were everywhere you looked (cars that weren't yellow; cars that weren't cabs). Everyone was heading somewhere, each in his own enclosed little world. It reminded me of being a kid and loving when my dad would pick up my brother Ed and me for a weekend visit. We'd get on the freeway in order to drive north to my relatives in Saticoy or else south to where my dad lived, first in Del Mar and then later in Long Beach. I used to wonder about all the people in all of those cars. I would try and make up stories for them, inventing scenarios that would place them on that particular stretch of freeway at that particular time of the day, heading in that particular direction.

After I was dropped off by the bus, I picked a blue Ford Escort from the dozen available rental cars. It was new and comfortable. I plugged in my iPod, hit *shuffle*, and within minutes was heading north on the 405.

I had taken an early flight so I could get into Los Angeles by midday, get the car, and then spend some time driving around the city before checking into my hotel and attending the conference for the next two days. The conference was being held at the downtown convention center, a huge glass pavilion that hadn't existed when I moved from the city in early 1997. I wasn't going to be able to get in any sightseeing in between all of the keynote speeches, breakout sessions, and working lunches, so this was going to be my only chance.

As I drove around LA, I discovered that most of the places I used to go to were gone: Aron's Records, the Showcase Theater, Dynasty Coffee, Big and Tall Books. A few of my old haunts were still there, namely Book Soup and the New Beverly Cinema, two places I'd spent untold amounts of time and money. Other than that, the city had changed just

enough to make it familiar but no longer mine. As I drove down Beverly and approached the Beverly Center—a huge mall that I’d written about in my second novel, *Geniuses of Crack*—I barely recognized it due to all of the changes that had been made.

I drove until dusk when finally, feeling hungry, I headed east on Santa Monica Boulevard toward my favorite pizza place, Palermo. As I crossed the various streets, all of which held some sort of significance for me—Spaulding, Gardner, Plymouth, Orange—I felt like I was digging my way through layers of sedimentary rock. Each block was another stage of evolution, each neighborhood another memory, each zip code another era.

It was six o’clock by the time I got to Palermo. The place was only half-full, but I knew that it’d be packed by the time I left. Since I was alone, I didn’t get to sit in one of the big booths that lined the middle of the main room of the restaurant like a spine. Instead, I was sitting against the wall near the bar, the last in a line of tables for two. Above me was a mural of Italy. After the waiter took my order for a medium pepperoni pizza and delivered me a beer, I looked down at the paper placemat of Italy. Since I’d been here last, I’d actually traveled to some of the cities on the cartoon map. Grainne and I had gone to Venice and Milan, and had further plans to visit Rome and Florence. But then we got divorced.

The place hadn’t changed much since I started going there more than twenty years ago, and this added to the already surreal experience. I felt stuck in a fantasy. Had I gone back in time? Was it 1989 and not 2009? I touched my head for confirmation; the lack of hair assured me that time had indeed passed. Plus, my head was full of memories, years of them. My memories then began to careen through my mind on fast-forward, as if to connect the dots from this day to when I first walked through the door all those years ago.

The pizza arrived and I tried to concentrate on it. It was delicious, as usual. I finished nearly the entire pie, deciding not to bring the last slice back to the hotel since I’d have

nowhere to put it. I paid in cash and then got up to leave, even though I wouldn't have minded staying and losing myself in the crowd for another hour.

As I was heading through the back of the restaurant, to get my rental car which had been valet-parked in the small parking lot behind the building, I thought I saw someone who looked familiar. By this time Palermo was packed; people were milling around the foyer waiting to be seated, and all the tables in both dining rooms were filled. Dozens of waiters and waitresses—all of them wearing the red Palermo T-shirt—buzzed through the cramped space carrying dishes, drinks, pizzas. The person who looked familiar was sitting in the second section of the restaurant. I could see him from the back, although my view was partially obscured by a pillar painted to look like aged stone. He was with someone, a woman, though I couldn't see her face. The ear and side of his head seemed to be mine, and the long fingers on the right hand—the only hand I could see—were a distinct match for my own. I couldn't get a better look at him since customers and busboys kept walking in front of me (the traffic in the restaurant was equal to any street in LA). I blinked and looked again, and when I did the hand suddenly looked less like my own. I decided not to investigate further, chalking up the vision to my encroaching jetlag. I got in the rental car and headed to my hotel.

I hadn't planned on doing what I ended up doing. When I woke up on Tuesday, I really thought I was going to go to the conference. I took a shower, shaved, and it was just as I was going to the closet to get dressed that I made my decision. Instead of reaching for the grey suit and blue dress shirt (the lack of a tie was my concession to California's casualness), I turned to the dresser and pulled out a pair of jeans and a Fred Perry polo. I grabbed my

messenger bag and threw into it my iPhone and iPod. On the way out of the room I scooped up my wallet, some change, and put on my watch that was still flashing twelve o'clock.

As I entered the lobby, I could see through the glass windows looking out onto South Flower Street the chartered busses filling up with conference attendees. The people who had checked in last night, attending the opening night cocktail reception, were already wearing nametags hung around their necks from show-sponsored lanyards. Others carried the similarly branded cheap black canvas tote bags stuffed with assorted goodies: Google notepad, Cisco flash drive, Microsoft water bottle. I had dozens of similar bits of swag from other conferences; I wasn't going to miss a few more. Missing the conference itself also wasn't any great loss. I could read various accounts of it online, and view the keynotes later on YouTube or the conference's website. If anyone asked me about it at the office later in the week, I felt I could easily bluff and pretend that I had been there.

I went to the curb and handed the parking attendant the claim ticket for my rental car. While I was waiting for it to emerge from the garage, someone in line for the conference shuttle recognized me and waved. I half-recognized him from two jobs ago, but instead of waving back I took a few singles out of my wallet in anticipation of getting my rental car. When the car arrived I gave the attendant a tip, found the freeway, and headed north on the 101.

As I drove, I went back to an idea that had been forming in my mind ever since the night before at Palermo when I could have sworn I saw yet another Jeff Gomez. If there could be three different versions of me in New York, each of which were leading different lives based on decisions he did or didn't make, then why couldn't there be yet another version of me in California?

In 1997, I made the decision to leave Los Angeles and move to Manhattan. It was a big decision and I deliberated over it for months. In the end I opted for the move. But maybe, in some version of reality, I'd made the decision to stay. That was the me I saw at Palermo. But if I were to follow that logic, then there was also a version of me who'd stayed in South Carolina with that girlfriend, or who never left that first apartment in Burbank, or else who still lived with his dad and stepmom in Pasadena in that room off the kitchen, the way I did for that first directionless year after high school.

If there were indeed as many branches as it seemed, or else so many paths—one for each possible permutation—then, like a branching river, I'd have to travel as far upstream as possible to find the source. And if I got rid of that source, maybe it could somehow solve my problem. Maybe the other branches would fall away, leaving my life, my name, and my memories solely to me.

That source, the beginning of all this—I was sure—had to be here, in California. It was probably in Thousand Oaks, the town I had left when I was eighteen. That had to be where the first branch occurred; it was the first real choice I ever made, an adult taking responsibility for himself and his own actions. So if I—twenty-one years ago—made the decision to leave home, as well as get out of Thousand Oaks, then there must be a version of me still there who chose to stay.

Thousand Oaks is just one of a number of small communities that form a string of cities between Ventura and Los Angeles. I grew up in a condominium in a small neighborhood named Wildwood, nestled into the corner of the town. Thousand Oaks was home to a couple of schools, a huge mall, and a small college. We had been happy there, my brother,

mom, and I (my parents divorced when I was young). It was quiet and safe and the lifestyle was typically Southern Californian. We saw *Star Wars*, listened to the Eagles, wore Vans sneakers, sported OP shorts. We had tans, wore puka shell necklaces, and sought air conditioning in tract houses when it became too hot to ride BMX bikes.

I got off the 101 near the library, the one I remembered had been built on the outskirts of town near the soccer fields. I wanted to first check the phone book, although I knew my name wouldn't be there because I've never, at any point in my life, chosen to be listed in a phone book. If this original Jeff were truly me, or vice versa, this would be the case. After parking and making my way inside (having to ask for directions to find the phone books), I flipped through the thick directory and, sure enough, he wasn't listed. I grinned.

Not having any other address to check out, I decided to go to the last place I'd lived: the condo in Wildwood. It was part of a large complex, a cluster of four-condo units scattered amidst acres of nicer houses. Most of the people who lived there were single women with children, the aftermath of divorce. Even though most of my friends lived on the other side of town, in houses with their parents, it was a fun place to grow up.

As I drove through Thousand Oaks, I noticed all of the changes. The buildings where there used to be just fields of trees, new houses where there used to be old houses. At the entrance to Wildwood they'd added a stoplight and turn-lanes to a four-way intersection that used to just have, when I was growing up, a stop sign.

The condo complex was across from a park, which was connected on the other side to Wildwood Elementary, the school I'd attended from the second grade through to the sixth. The park was long and consisted of a playground at the top, a strip of grass down the center, and a wooden fort at the end. Beyond the fort were sinewy hiking paths that wound down and through canyons, culminating in a waterfall known locally simply as the Falls. A

cement path lined one side of the park and, on the other side, a sloping hill led up to the outer perimeter of the elementary school. The condo we'd lived in was right up against the park. The only thing separating the condo from the park was a six-foot black iron fence that stretched the length of the park. My friends and I would occasionally try and walk the fence like a tightrope, but none of us could ever manage for more than a few steps.

I parked up the street from our unit on Rio Grande. I hopped out of the rental car and jogged down the driveway. The mailboxes were housed in a communal unit and bolted to the stucco wall outside the common carport. The name on the mailbox for 607, our old unit, said OULIPO and not GOMEZ. After my failure at the library, and then this, my search was off to a slow start. I jogged up to the rental car and headed back into Thousand Oaks.

For the next couple of hours I aimlessly drove around town, keeping my eyes open. I didn't expect to just run across myself on the street, or to pull up next to me in a car, but I didn't have anything else to go on so all I did was drive. I went for a late lunch to a Mexican place on Thousand Oaks Boulevard called Lupe's that I remembered from my childhood as being twice as small and three times as good. By then it was getting dark and I was getting tired. I hadn't slept very well the last couple of nights, and my jetlag was hard to shake.

The only hotel I knew of in the area was a Marriott Courtyard right off the freeway near where Thousand Oaks began to blend into Westlake. My brother had had his prom at this hotel twenty-five years ago. I drove over and got a room. I spent the night trying to Google myself in order to get clues on where or if I might live in town, but I had no success. At nine I ordered up room service and after I ate I went to bed early.

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In the morning I brushed my teeth and took a shower. It was only when I faced the prospect of wearing the same set of clothes for another day that I saw the foolishness of having left the hotel on such a whim. Los Angeles wasn't so far away I couldn't drive back in order to get a change of clothes, but I was here and wanted to keep the momentum I'd managed to gather. If I went back, I'd probably forget about this crazy scheme and just attend the second day of the conference. If I left right then, I could still catch the last of the morning keynotes, most of the day two sessions, and do some good networking at lunch.

I decided to go to the mall and buy some clothes. Once I'd done that and had changed, I'd feel refreshed and ready to resume my search. I checked my iPhone and saw that most of the stores in the mall didn't open for another couple of hours, so I grabbed the Raymond Chandler novel I'd started reading on the plane—*The Big Sleep*; seeing Jeff reading one of his books had given me the idea—and headed off for breakfast. I ate at a restaurant called Mimi's Café. It sounded like a small local place but was actually part of a chain. It was the kind of family restaurant you find in the suburbs that's swamped every night at six but empty by eight.

After eating I guided myself subliminally to the Oaks, a mall I used to go to often as a kid. Every route to it from any point in town was tattooed on my brain. But as I entered the building and walked around a bit, I discovered—much to my disappointment—that the mall was like a smaller version of Los Angeles. It had changed and was now nearly unrecognizable to me. The pizzeria was gone, same as the pretzel place and the small store that sold lemonade and ice cream bars they'd roll around in diced almonds. No more Tilt Arcade, B. Dalton Books, or Warehouse Records. Only JC Penney, a cut-rate store where we'd had to shop when I was growing up, still remained.

I was looking for a Banana Republic or J. Crew, someplace where I could buy a pair of boxers, maybe another pair of jeans, some socks and a shirt. Thankfully, they had a Banana Republic and in a matter of minutes I found what I needed. I considered taking off the tags and wearing the clothes out of the store—like I used to do with shoes when I was a kid—but instead I figured I'd head back to the hotel, snip off the tags, and change there.

As I was walking back to the exit that was close to where I'd parked, I saw something. A figure in one of the stores caught my eye. At first I thought it was a mirror and that I'd caught a glimpse of myself as I passed. This happened all the time in malls; all those stores, all of those glistening panes of glass. But what was odd was that the image I saw in the reflection was wearing different clothes. I turned around and walked back, retracing my steps. When I saw him again, I knew I'd found what I was looking for. In the Apple store, on the upper level of the Oaks mall in Thousand Oaks, California, I saw myself.

I ducked behind a huge planter. Peering through the fronds of the fake tree, I watched as Jeff walked the floor of the Apple store. I then made a sickening discovery. Jeff wasn't shopping; he worked there. Wearing a black T-shirt, same as the dozen or so other employees working the floor that day, he also had an iPod dangling from a day-glo string hung around his neck. On his hip was some sort of device, a portable credit card machine that I watched him use a second later to sell an external hard drive to a girl half our age.

For the next twenty minutes I watched as Jeff walked the floor along with the other employees, all of whom seemed to be absurdly young. At first I had hoped that he was at least the store manager, in charge of all the college and high school students he was working with. But when an older guy came by in a collared shirt and sent him to the back to get

something—he returned five minutes later with his arms filled with headphones—I knew that this wasn't the case. He didn't even work at the Genius Bar, fixing iPods and iMacs. Instead, Jeff was just another grunt working retail.

At noon the guy in the collared shirt came by and tapped Jeff on the shoulder. Jeff then removed the iPod from around his neck, stowed the credit card device behind the counter, and headed out into the mall a free man: lunch break. I tailed him up to the food court. I watched as he circled the various vendors, trying to decide what he wanted. He finally settled on Taco Bell. I knew what he ordered, not because I could see his lips move or hear his words. I knew because I'd been getting the same thing at Taco Bell for the past thirty years. When he had his food, he walked to the farthest spot in the food court he could find, away from everyone, and began to eat his lunch.

I watched from across the tables. In addition to the black shirt Jeff was wearing black jeans; they looked worn and were slouchy. On his feet were big black sneakers; Reeboks or Nike. Between the cuffs and top of his shoes I could see white socks peeking through. I also noticed that his hair was a bit longer on the sides and in the back than mine, and his face sported an unkempt goatee like the one I'd had when I was in my twenties. On his left hand I spotted a wedding ring.

After scarfing down the Taco Bell, he walked back to the Apple store still sipping on his jumbo-sized drink. Jeff entered the store and went behind the counter, emerging without the Taco Bell cup. But in its place he had the credit card machine once again strapped to his waist. Back to work.

I spied on him for hours, watching Jeff walk the floor, talk to customers, and point out features of the various computers and devices. He sold a few things and I wondered if he worked on commission or whether it was a straight salary. Would today be considered a

good day? At two the guy in the shirt came by and tapped him again on the shoulder. I watched Jeff smile for only the second time that day. He turned in the credit card machine and then walked triumphantly out of the store, I guessed for a break.

I followed him down the wide corridors of the mall, keeping enough space between us so that no one would notice that we were duplicates. This was easy to do since it was getting to be early afternoon and the schools were now closed, so the Oaks was filling up with kids. My junior high, Redwood, was just up the street.

Jeff walked into one of the large department stores. He made a straight line through the jewelry, shoe, and perfume departments, heading for the huge bank of double doors—six in all—that led to the outside. It was very sunny out; brighter than it had been this morning. I lost him momentarily in the glare as my eyes took time to adjust. He walked past the rows and rows of SUVs and minivans, each of which had on them AYSO decals and bumper stickers proclaiming how their kid was an honor student. After fifty feet or so, the main clump of cars close to the department store thinned out. I figured that this was where the employees had to park; keep the spots closest to the mall free for the customers. Jeff unlocked a shabby looking Honda hatchback from the mid-'90s and hopped in.

I quickly patted down my pockets, searching for the keys to my rental car and trying to remember where it was I'd parked. I doubted I'd be quick enough to be able to follow him anywhere.

A few seconds later, I saw the windows in the Honda roll down one by one; they weren't automatic. I drifted over a couple of lanes, so as not to be seen. The Honda became filled with a puff of white smoke as a cigarette was lit. *Smoke break*, I thought to myself.

For the next five minutes puffs emanated from the windows of the Honda while a car or two grazed up and down the lanes looking for a good spot. I saw the cigarette fly out

the window, still lit, and then the windows were closed in the same stuttering manner they were opened. Jeff then got out of the Honda, locked the door, spit, and walked back to the mall with his shoulders hunched. I didn't give chase; I just watched him go.

After he disappeared inside the mall, I approached his car. The paint job was faded, rusting at the bottom and pale on top from being baked in the sun. The inside of the car was filthy. The ashtray was overflowing with cigarette butts and the backseat held an assortment of huge cups from local fast food places: Carl's Jr., In-and-Out, Weinerschnitzel. The stereo was just a cassette and radio, and there was dust on the dashboard and dirt and grime on the windshield. As I was walking away, I scribbled down the license plate number.

I picked up some fast food at a drive-thru on my way back to the hotel. I ate my late lunch at the desk overlooking the parking lot. I had a good view of the 101, and I ate watching all of the cars going past, the traffic thickening as the afternoon wore on and rush hour approached. After my meal I changed into my new clothes, and then I stared at the license plate number.

In detective novels, the hero is always an ex-cop who has a friend at headquarters still willing to take his calls even though the private detective left the force years ago. This old friend gives our hero all kinds of inside information: addresses, details, scoops, or the chance to slip away from houses that contain dead bodies before the coroner comes and begins to ask too many questions. But I didn't have any friends like that. All my colleagues had regular, boring jobs, and they knew just about as much as I did when it came to what you could do with a license plate number.

I threw the scrap of paper to the floor and tried a different approach. Using my iPhone, I Googled the phone number of the Apple store in the mall. I glanced at the clock on the bedside table. It was a bit past five; I figured Jeff was done for the day. I dialed and asked for the manager. After a few minutes of being on hold, someone picked up.

“Speaking,” a whiny voice said. In the background I could hear phones ringing and customers asking questions and salespeople responding, Apple products being pushed. After a few seconds of silence, the voice squeaked, “Yes, can I can help you?” I was sad that some version of me had to take orders from that voice.

“Yeah, sorry, it’s me, uh—Jeff Gomez?” Saying this made me laugh; it felt so inauthentic and yet it was the truth. I’d also, for some reason, made my voice deep and given it a California accent. I was trying to sound like me, but this made no sense since I already was me. I resumed speaking, but in my regular voice. “Sorry about that. It’s me. Jeff.”

“Gomez,” the voice said. “What’s the matter? Your shift just ended. What, did you forget to punch your timecard *again*?” He laughed a one-sided laugh.

“No, it’s my paycheck. I didn’t receive the last one. Can you tell me where it was mailed? I want to verify that you have the right—”

He cut me off with more laughter.

“Mailed? Gomez, you have direct deposit. We *all* do. No one gets their check *mailed*.”

“Oh, yeah—sorry.” I paused, caught off guard. But then an idea came to me. “Then I guess I’d better follow up with my bank. Can you confirm what address you have for me on file? It might come up.”

“Yes, fine.” He sounded annoyed. I heard a keyboard being punched; my name going into a computer. “Let’s see...we have you at 2710 Valencia Circle. Is that correct?”

“That’s it, thanks,” I said and then hung up.

When I punched the address into Google Maps, I was pretty shocked at what it showed me. Valencia Circle was a small cul-de-sac growing off of Velarde Drive, a street that itself was a loop hanging down from Avenida De Los Arboles, a road that cut across the top of Thousand Oaks like a headband. My old elementary school, Wildwood, was located on Velarde just down the street from Valencia Circle. Growing up, I'd had a bunch of friends who'd lived in this neighborhood. Whenever I'd cycle through those tree-lined streets, I was always jealous of the families who lived there. The school was sort of a dividing line. On one side were these nice family homes with two car garages and pools. On the other side was the park—where kids who didn't have a yard played—and next to that was the condo complex where I grew up.

I bet the Jeff who lived there considered it a triumph to live in the neighborhood, a place we'd coveted while we were young. He was probably proud of his achievement, as if by moving from one corner of this small town to another he'd made some great social leap and achieved the American dream. But I found it pathetic that he'd thought so colossally small and that, in twenty years, he'd only managed to travel a handful of streets.

I left the hotel and drove back into town. I passed a hardware store on Thousand Oaks Boulevard and went in. I wandered around, not sure what I was looking for. I finally found—in a back corner—a collection of various lengths of steel pipe. I grabbed a few, weighing them in my hand and then resting them on my shoulder like a baseball bat.

A young kid wearing a black vest came up to me and asked, "Can I help you?"

"Nope, I'm fine," I replied. "I'll take this pipe."

"Do you need anything else to go with that? Epoxy or tape?"

"No," I said, winking. "This'll do it."

On the way back to the hotel I picked up more drive-thru, ate in my room, and came up with a plan.

I drove out to Valencia Circle at a bit after ten o'clock. I didn't want it to get too late since after eleven I'd probably be the only car on the road. But at this time of night—not too late, not too early—I figured I could slip away semi-undetected as part of the last drowsy traffic of the evening.

I parked on San Miguel, at the mouth of the cul-de-sac, about half a block away from the house. I popped the trunk by pressing a small blue button on the rental car's keychain. I retrieved the length of pipe and quickly hid it underneath my shirt, shivering as the cold metal met my skin.

There was no one on the street. Half the houses were quiet, windows blacked out, days already ended. The other houses had a few windows, here and there, still lit-up: residents staying up to watch talk shows, local news, sports scores. A few houses leaked noise in addition to light, mostly of laugh tracks or TV anchors, but otherwise the street was silent. There was no wind, no sound rising up from the nearby canyon; even the arroyo was going to sleep for the night.

I found Jeff's house. It was a typical Southern California ranch house. It shared DNA with its neighbors, but there was enough different to give it some personality. It seemed the smallest house on the block, which was yet another indignity. The lawn was overgrown, and I could see—hanging from the roof and the rain gutters—Christmas lights he'd left up all year long. The Honda was parked in the driveway even though there was a



two-car garage. *Too many tools*, I figured. *Too much junk*. In the suburbs, no one used their garages for cars.

I quietly lifted the latch to the gate that led to the backyard. I entered and then, silently, closed the gate behind me. I paused for a second to see if anyone had seen me enter, to see if anyone was going to yell at me to halt, stop, get the hell out of there. But then I figured that even if someone *had* seen me, what they would have seen is me going into my backyard. Instead of screaming at me to stop trespassing, they would have yelled, “Jeff, what happened? Did you lose your keys?” After remaining still for a few seconds, hearing and seeing nothing, I decided the coast was clear.

By now my eyes had adjusted to the dark and I could make my way along the side of the house without tripping over the uncoiled garden hose that I could easily see shining in the moonlight. There was also a pair of girl’s tricycles, rusted and dirty. Did Jeff have daughters or did the previous owner, and Jeff had just been too lazy to ever throw the fucking things out? Underneath the kitchen window was a stack of tiles, about a dozen of them. They looked to be the same tiles as the tile I was standing on, the ones that formed an erratic path from the driveway and which seemed to wind around the side of the house. I picked up one of the tiles, trying not to make a sound as I did so.

Edging around the house, I saw myself sitting on the couch through a gap in the curtains hanging over sliding glass doors. Jeff was wearing pajama bottoms and a white T-shirt that had on it a silk-screened version of the *Rubber Soul* cover. *It figures*, I thought to myself. *I liked the Beatles in high school*. His wife didn’t seem to be around; she was probably in bed already. The living room was filled with pink toys. I guessed these belonged to the girls, the ones whose tricycles had rusted long ago. They must have also been upstairs, sleeping.

I took out the pipe from my shirt with my left hand. In my right hand I held the tile like a discus. I took a big step backward and then lunged forward, tossing with all of my strength the terra cotta tile through the sliding glass doors. The glass shattered instantly, raining down in chunks and shards that looked in the moonlight like blue snowflakes. From inside the house I heard Jeff shout, “*Holy shit!*”

I readied myself for the sound of an alarm, but there was nothing: no bells, no lights, no siren. *Cheapskate*. I then wondered if he owned a gun, but then I figured he didn’t. From inside the house—in the silence after the glass stopped falling—I heard dialogue from a *Seinfeld* rerun, an early episode where Jerry and Elaine sleep with each other after years of platonic friendship. It seemed strange that this version of me could find any enjoyment in *Seinfeld*, a show that was supposedly about nothing but was in fact about Manhattan: the trials of the subway, trying to rent the perfect apartment, going to the Hamptons for the weekend. That life must have looked positively alien to someone who’d spent his entire life in this small California town. I wondered if, when this version of me would watch it—sitting on that couch, here in the suburbs, while his family slept upstairs—would he feel something? A twinge, a spark, a reflex that told him somewhere out there he was living that life.

“Who’s—who’s there?” His voice, wild, agitated, came from inside the house. “What the fuck do you want?”

The fear and forced bravado convinced me he didn’t have a gun. When you have a gun, fear is in the other guy’s voice.

“Answer me, motherfucker.”

I stayed silent, hoping to lure him into the backyard where it was dark.

A shadow slowly emerged, backlit from the room. He began to step through the rubble and over the glass stalactites and stalagmites that rimmed the giant hole in the middle of the glass door. From upstairs, a female: “Jeff, honey, what’s going on?”

One leg was through the door; it was him. I could tell.

Then the girls began, one of them crying out, one of them screaming, but both in unison, desperately, “*Daddy!*”

The second leg stepped onto the tile. I could see his hands clumsily, foolishly, raised for a fight. I gripped the pipe with both hands and raised it over my head. I quickly brought it down onto the figure standing in front of me, swinging with all of my power in a quick succession of multiple blows. I was aiming for the head but at the last second lost my nerve and drifted to the right, catching him above the left shoulder, almost at the base of the neck. After a number of solid and brutal shots that felt like chopping down a tree, he went down.

On the ground he alternately twitched and crawled, reacting to the pain but also trying to get away. Beneath the continuing screaming in the house coming from his wife and kids, he made a noise like car tires on gravel as he crawled over the bits of broken glass to get back into the house.

I again raised the pipe over my head, my heart beating so fast I thought that at any second it was going to burst and then we’d both be dead. My breaths were coming short and rapid, creating in front of my mouth brief clouds in the cold. I was waiting for Jeff to turn and face me, to know what was happening and who was doing this to him. If he didn’t, could the chain be broken? If this were just a random attack, it’d merely be one branch gone, a pruning and not tearing down the whole thing. But he didn’t turn. He didn’t look. Jeff just lay there on the ground, squirming slower but breathing heavily. I could see a pool of dark blood growing from underneath the Beatles T-shirt. The thick liquid flowed over the tile and

almost covered it completely. From inside the house, I heard frenzied steps on carpeted stairs. Someone was coming. The wife, probably, holding the hands of the girls. I lowered my arms and dropped the pipe to the tile. It landed with a metallic clang that echoed through the quiet night. I then turned and headed for the fence, retracing my steps back to the driveway, back to Valencia Circle. I stopped for a second, thinking that I should go back for the pipe, but decided against it. After all, all anybody would find were my fingerprints and I had an alibi. I was sitting on the couch watching *Seinfeld*.

The next morning there was a story about the incident in the local paper (headline: LOCAL MAN FENDS OFF ATTACKER). I only skimmed it for the details. *Unknown assailant, botched robbery, pattern in the neighborhood, perpetrator fled, serious injuries, broken bones, if it'd been an inch closer to the spine, expected to make a full recovery.* Near the end a quote caught my eye. It was from my wife, Jeanine: "If I'd have lost him, I don't know what I would have done. He means everything in the world to me and his girls." It was standard fare, the kind of thing you'd hope or expect a wife to say. But the name rang a bell. I checked out of the Marriott and was halfway back to LA when it hit me: I'd had a sweetheart in elementary school named Jeanine.

I grabbed my suitcase from the other hotel and headed for the airport. While picking up my boarding pass at the United counter, I saw a few people carrying tote bags from the conference I was supposed to have been attending. All of that seemed a million miles away. As the woman was checking my bag, when I gave my driver's license, she did a double take.

"Well," she said slowly, examining my ID through a set of bifocals, "isn't that remarkable?"

“What? What is?”

She pulled a copy of *The Los Angeles Times* from underneath her computer. She pointed to a story buried in the back pages, an obituary. “You just died,” she said. “Look, right here, Jeff Gomez, author, dead at thirty-nine.”

“But that’s got to be a mistake. A different—”

“No, no,” she insisted, not wanting to be proved wrong. “Look at the photograph. It’s *you*.”

“But there weren’t...serious injuries.” I said this slowly, almost mumbling. Behind me I could feel the tension of the crowd I was holding up. “The article said ‘expected to make a full recovery.’”

“Well,” the woman said, waving the newspaper around. “I don’t know what article *you* read, but this one here says *dead*. After all, it’s hard to make a full recovery from being flattened by two cars.”

She shoved the paper at me and I took it. There was indeed a photo of me, taken over a decade ago for my first novel, *Our Noise*. Again, I didn’t read the entire article, I just scanned it. *Born in Southern California, moved to Manhattan, wrote a cult novel, killed in Soho crossing the street, lunchtime traffic, two cars, died instantly, no charges against the drivers, accident.*

I handed the paper back to the woman in a daze. She turned very serious, and then turned to pick up a red phone under her desk and, when she did, I grabbed my boarding pass and claim ticket for the luggage and ran for the gate.

GRAINNE FLEW HOME on Saturday, but just for a night. Heather still wanted her company and Grainne found it hard to refuse. They'd been friends for so long. So she flew home just for the weekend, dropping off Zachery and giving me my anniversary present (a Paul Smith wallet I'd wanted for a long time). Her parents offered to fly up from Virginia to help care for Zachery and I was grateful for this since, after the events of the last week, I was tense and confused and knew that I needed help.

All of this activity—the arrival of my in-laws and the departure of my wife—provided a much-needed diversion from the fact that there were now three different versions of me running around the New York area. Between dinner, brunch, sorting out the guest room, trips to Whole Foods, helping Grainne pack, and taking care of Zachery, my mind was mostly occupied. When Monday morning finally came, I drove my wife out to Newark and then headed back to Montclair rather than park at the train station and commute into Manhattan and work. I made up an excuse for my in-laws—who were surprised to see me back so soon—telling them I was feeling a little under the weather and

didn't want to spread germs amongst my staff. I also told them there was a big project I'd been working on—a Powerpoint audit of our competitors' websites—that I was only halfway through and thus needed serious attention. They were understanding and vowed to help keep Zachery out of my hair for the next couple of days.

While my sniffles may have been fake, the presentation, unfortunately, was real. The deadline was looming and I hadn't made as much progress as I should have. On Monday I managed to get a decent amount of work done so, on Tuesday—per the arrangement last Friday with Dr. Schwartz and the other mes—I went into the office.

As I walked into the building, I felt like a teacher returning to his classroom after being out sick for a few days. Had the substitute followed my lesson plan? Had the students behaved while I was away? Supposedly the Jeff who filled in for me yesterday knew my job just as well as I did (considering it was also his job), but the whole thing was still so strange I didn't know what I'd find when I sat down at my desk.

I was nervous as I got off the elevator at the second floor. I waved my building pass in front of the gray box that caused a little LED light to turn from red to green and, just as I was opening the door, it was opened by a woman who worked for me.

“Good morning, Jeff,” she said.

Out of reflex, I replied, “Good morning, Sarah.”

Sarah then walked down the hall, pressed the *up* button for the elevator (probably headed for the cafeteria on fifteen), and I headed for my desk. I walked down the hallway with a bit more confidence than before, nodding and saying “Good morning” to whomever I passed (whether I knew them or not). I then unlocked my office and went in, a bit sad that no one had yet asked about my long weekend, or inquired about my health. But then I remembered: those excuses were only for my wife and in-laws. According to my staff and

co-workers—even though I'd spent yesterday at home in New Jersey—as far as they knew they'd seen me here, in my office in New York.

I woke up my computer, logged into my account, and opened up Entourage to see how many emails I had waiting for me. Usually after a three-day weekend I'd have over a hundred emails, a number of them marked urgent with a little red flag. That morning there were only the few that had come in before I got into the office (and those were mostly from the UK, where they were already halfway through their work day). Other than that, everything was taken care of. There weren't even any messages waiting for me in my voicemail. The me who had been here yesterday was quite thorough. There wasn't any mail, nor any interoffice envelopes, waiting on my desk. No invoices, no vacation forms, no nothing. I then opened up my calendar and discovered that, except for a few routine weekly meetings with people from my department, I didn't have any big appointments over the next couple of days. All of this made me relieved, like coming home from a long vacation and realizing that your house is okay; you haven't been robbed.

Since it was a slow morning and I had the time, plus I needed some answers—what Dr. Schwartz had told me last week was just not enough—I went back to the website I'd visited the week before, *yourefamiliar.com*. Remembering the layout of the home page from last time, I quickly clicked on an icon of an envelope in the upper corner. This opened up an email with the subject header of *Information Wanted*. I wrote a short message asking what the site was all about, feeling like an idiot but also feeling like I didn't have much of a choice.

Before I could even click over to the *Times* for the latest headlines, my computer's email program chimed, telling me I had a new email. It was from the same email address I had just written to, *info@yourefamiliar.com*. At first I thought it was an error message, that my email had bounced back because the link on the website was improperly programmed or



maybe my network was momentarily down and so none of my emails were making it in or out. But instead of an error message, the email was indeed from yourefamiliar.com. The subject line read, *Have a feeling there's more than one of you?* As I clicked on it, I could tell it was just an automatic response, a form letter their website spit out to anyone who sent them an email. It read:

*Have you recently had a profound experience you just can't explain? Do you think you've seen someone who looks just like you? Does the world you presently find yourself in seem alien and strange, and not like the world you know or used to know? Have there been lots of little coincidences lately that you just can't explain? Have you been recently gripped by déjà vu so real and pronounced that it almost knocked you off your feet? If so, we'd like to talk to you. We are a team of dedicated professionals who know what you're going through and can help. To begin the process, visit the Personality Quiz page at the link below and take the test. If your results warrant a response, someone from our organization will get back to you in 2-4 business days. Please know that your answers, along with your identities, will be kept strictly confidential. We're ready to believe all of you.*

At first I thought that the plural of “identity” was a typo, but I then reconsidered. This was the place I was looking for. The link took me back to the website, to a page from the home page I hadn't noticed before. The page contained a quiz, along with a header that showed a smaller version of a photo from the home page: two people who looked exactly alike with their arms around each other. Next to this were the words *You're Familiar* in a modern script.

The personality test was twenty multiple choice questions, asking strange things like, “At times I feel lost and disconnected for no real reason” and “I absolutely should not have made certain obvious mistakes in my life.” Each question was graded on the following scale: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree*. If this was a practical joke, it was a pretty elaborate one.

I briefly considered filling out the test. My finger hovered over the mouse in order to answer the first question (“I have recently had an experience that caused me to become disoriented in time”), but I finally decided not to. I’d wasted most of my morning and should be getting down to work. Besides, I still thought that the whole situation was somehow a joke or a con. The website and those other two imposters out there were only pretending to be me. None of it could be real; how could it? Scrolling down to the bottom of the Web page, to see if there was any additional contact info, I noticed a module that said, *Are you in real pain and need immediate HELP? If so, enter your phone number and zip code and a local representative will call you.*

Figuring I had nothing to lose, I entered the number to my iPhone, along with the zip code for my Soho office. I hit SUBMIT and then went back to Entourage, plowing through all of the emails that had piled up as I’d been goofing off. Fifteen minutes later, my iPhone rang. The sound was muffled since it was tucked away in my messenger bag sitting beside my desk. I had to scramble to fish it out before the call went to voicemail. I first took a quick glance at the screen as I pulled out the phone, to see who was calling; it said YR FAMILIAR, INC.

“Hello?”

“Hi there,” it was a woman’s voice. “I’m calling from You’re Familiar. How can we help all of you today?”

“What? Oh, yes, sorry—I forgot.” I got up and closed my door. “Yeah,” I said, shielding the phone with my hands in an effort to contain my voice. “I guess I’m having a problem.”

“Okay, sir, first let me ask you, did you fill out the online survey?”

The voice was pleasant; she sounded young. I listened for extra noises in the background, but there was only silence. It didn’t sound like she was in a huge room surrounded by dozens of other workers, each with a headset strapped to their heads and fielding similar calls: the handling of multiple personalities by multiple people.

“The survey? No, I’m sorry, I didn’t. I wasn’t really sure any of this was legitimate. Or just a scam or something like that.”

“Sir,” she began, sounding very sincere, “we don’t want your bank account info or to put you on TV. You’re Familiar has no financial stake in anything that you do. We just want to help. That’s all.” Her voice was pleasant and reassuring. “So why don’t you tell me what happened?”

Through the glass wall of my office that borders a hallway leading from art to production, I watched as a young guy with red hair whose name I’d never learned pushed a silver cart overloaded with boxes and interoffice envelopes down the hallway. He glanced my way but then pushed past my office with a shrug; nothing today for me. After he turned the corner, there was just the dim hum from the fluorescent lighting above my head. I figured I didn’t have anything to lose.

“Well, okay.” I gulped. “Here goes.”

The whole story only took a handful minutes. It seemed a woefully short period for the amount of confusion and questions it had caused within me. At the end, after I was done telling her everything I knew, she was just as calm as before. All she said was, “Is that it?”

“What do you mean, *is that it?* Should there be more? I mean, frankly, I don’t even believe any of this is real.”

She chuckled mildly. She’d heard all this before.

“I mean, how can it be true?” I was breathing a little fast after telling her the circumstances of the last couple of days. “It can’t be, right? So I think it’s just a vision, or a dream or, somehow, both.”

“Listen, you said you’re in New York, right? Well, we’re based there, so why don’t you go and meet our founder and CEO. His name is Luther Blissett. I think he’ll be able to help you. What do you think? Maybe for lunch or a drink? Any time today is good. I think he can put all this into some perspective for you. For *all* of you.”

“Wait, what? Luther *who?* A drink? I don’t need a drink I need—and wait a second, *all of us?*”

“Mr. Gomez, go. Meet him. Talk.” Her voice had finally turned serious. “Trust me.”

I didn’t know who this woman was, but Grainne was still out of town and the in-laws were in Montclair with Zachery, so I figured I had nothing to lose. Plus, I needed a drink.

“Okay, fine.”

“Great,” she said, the lightness suddenly back in her voice. “Meet Luther at six o’clock tonight at Treble. Downstairs, in the lounge. It’s in Soho.”

“I know where it is. I work in Soho. I’ve been there before. But I don’t think there’s a—”

But she’d already hung up.

•

As I made my way east—first along Spring and then Prince—heading for Treble which was on Mercer a block shy of Broadway, I tried to think back to the last time I was there. It was almost a decade ago, 1999. I was working in the Flatiron at the time and was meeting a friend for drinks before we headed to a party at the loft headquarters of Pseudo.com, which was located a few blocks away.

It was an amazing time to be in New York. The city was flush with dotcom dollars and everyone, it seemed, was on their way to becoming an Internet millionaire. New companies were being started every other day and a whole new area of Manhattan—christened Silicon Alley—sprouted to opulent life. Manhattan felt very much like it must have in the ‘20s when life was fast and good and no one could ever see that lucky streak ending. Things were good, and they were going to stay good. Around the turn of the century the bubble finally burst, taking a huge chunk of the economy with it. Most New Yorkers were unrepentant. The prevailing attitude seemed to be, “It was fun while it lasted.”

When I finally got to Treble—it was hot out and I walked slowly in order to not break into a sweat—I paused for a second at the bar right inside the double doors. Beyond the bar I could see the dining room. There didn’t seem to be much else to the place.

The last time I was here you could still smoke in New York, and as I’d waited for my friend that night I’d ordered a vodka and lit a cigarette. Back then we were both single; I hadn’t even yet turned thirty. Meeting Grainne was still four years away. On nights like that it seemed as if anything were possible. Choices were everywhere.

I walked past the bar, which was sparsely populated, and into the dining room where a few couples were having an early meal. But other than a pair of restrooms in between a

glowing computer monitor onto which a waiter tapped an order, I couldn't see anything else. No stairs, no lounge. I figured that this meant there was also no Luther Blissett. I turned and was about to leave when a blond hostess caught my eye and said, "Looking for someone..." She then paused for dramatic effect; it worked. She had my attention. She finally added, "*Familiar?*"

"Y-yes," I stammered. "Luther Bliss—"

Before I could get out his entire name, she waved me toward a door that said EMPLOYEES ONLY. I choked out the word "Thanks" and then nudged the door open with a shove. On the other side was a steep staircase. The sound of conversations and a different kind of electronic music than was playing upstairs filled the space. I slowly walked down the staircase.

The room was large and, while it may not have been crowded upstairs—too early for either dinner or drinks—the lounge downstairs was packed. Out of the eight round tables all but a few were occupied. As I began to enter the room, my eyes adjusting to the light, I noticed that many of the people sitting at the tables looked alike. In fact, they all did. Every table but one was filled with either two, three, or even—in one corner—four people who looked like exact copies of each other. In the center of the room, sitting alone, was a guy who looked to be about my age wearing a grey suit, white shirt, and a grin. As I saw him I noticed that he was watching me intently. I figured, *That must be Luther*. I approached his table and, as I sat down, I finally recognized the music: Boards of Canada; *Twoism*.

"Luther, right?"

"Call me Luke," he said, taking a business card from his blazer and offering it along with his hand. "And you're Jeff?"

“Yes,” I replied, taking the card. When we shook hands, his grip was firm. “Thanks for seeing me on such short notice.”

“Not a problem.” He waved down a waitress. He asked her for another of what he’d been drinking and I ordered a beer. In the silence after the waitress left, I was the first to speak.

“So, what is this, an identical twin convention?”

Luther forced himself to laugh.

“Come on, Jeff, don’t be like that. You know what’s going on down here.”

“Actually, I don’t. That’s why I came.”

Luther turned and looked at me hard, maybe to see if I was just faking it to gain entry to his secret club. After holding me in his gaze for an uncomfortable set of seconds, he drained the last of his drink and then spoke.

“Something has happened to you recently, right? Something you just can’t explain, no matter how hard you try?”

I nodded.

“You’ve seen something, but you don’t really know what it was you saw, am I correct? Something that, by all rights, should be physically impossible. And this has got you questioning, well, everything. Life, the nature of existence, reality.”

I nodded again.

“That’s what I thought. And,” he paused to place a hand on his chest, “that’s where I come in.”

“Okay, I’m ready,” I said. “Hit me.”

Luther was about to speak when the waitress returned with our drinks. She gave him a wink when she dropped his off; it looked like a gin and tonic. Either that or a vodka and tonic. I could smell the lime from across the table.

“Thanks, Janice,” he said.

I took a quick swig of my beer; it was smooth and cold.

“Okay,” he began. “How much do you know about quantum physics?”

“A bit, I guess. I just read a book about the big bang.”

“Well,” he laughed, “this—in its own way—is bigger even than that.”

“Why? Does physics have something to do with all this?”

Luther took a sip of his drink and continued to grin.

“Depends on who you ask. But, suffice it to say, we don’t live in just a universe, meaning one chunk of space, albeit huge and infinite. Instead, we exist in a *multiverse*. This means there’s not just one universe, but billions of them.”

I nodded, trying to concentrate. I was following him so far.

“And a huge number of these other universes are copies of our own. This means that there are countless versions of you on planets almost exactly the same as the one you now know. The only difference between you and some of these other versions of you are the decisions you’ve made throughout your life. In fact, that’s what caused the universe to split in the first place.”

I nervously grabbed at my beer, but couldn’t decide if I wanted a sip or not.

“What you’re saying is if I have a choice between going out to dinner at a Chinese restaurant or an Italian restaurant, as I make the decision of which one to go to I split into two copies of me and actually go to *both*? One version of me in one universe goes to have Chinese and, in the other, the version of me has Italian?”



Luther grabbed a handful of nuts from a silver dish sitting on the table and popped a few into his mouth. Behind us a set of three women, all speaking in English accents and with reddish hair, got up to leave.

Chewing, Luther said, almost bored, “Yup, every time you make a choice the universe splits. *You* split.”

“That seems a bit of a waste, don’t you think? A whole universe just for a meal?”

“Depends on the meal.” He laughed but then got serious when he could see I was having a hard time understanding. “Look, don’t get bogged down in the details. And don’t dwell on the small choices like that. Obviously what you have for dinner’s not such a great difference, and it’s not such a huge choice. Most of the yous that are out there, even with the small differences, are fairly synchronized. You wouldn’t really notice the differences.”

Luther then leaned in and touched my shoulder, pulling me close to him.

“Jeff, listen to me.” He was almost whispering. “Right now, in another universe, you and I are having this exact same conversation. Well, maybe not the *exact* conversation, which is why they’re where they are and why we’re where we are. Maybe they’re sitting at a different table, or wearing different clothes, but it’s happening. It’s *us*.”

A waitress, one of the four identical looking Janices roaming the room, bumped up against my chair as she passed.

“Okay,” I said. “Even if there *were* multiple universes somewhere, and there’s a world where I had pizza for lunch today instead of a turkey sandwich, and this has always been the case since the beginning of time, then why am I—all of the sudden—running into these other versions of me? Why doesn’t turkey sandwich-me stay in his own turkey sandwich world and pizza-me stay in his own pizza world?”

“Usually, they do. But every once in a while, well, something happens. The technical term for it is a global causality violation, but we like to call it a *punch*.”

“Like, a drink?”

“No,” Luther said, shaking his head. He then made a fist out of his left hand, which he quickly raised and used to stab at the air. “Like *this*. A punch. A breakthrough. Like, a *tear*. We can occasionally punch through our world to another, and this allows us to visit a parallel universe where we also exist.”

“But how is the punching so specific? Why didn’t one of the other Jeffs punch through and land on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, or else end up in the middle of the ocean? Why are they each going to the same therapist that I go to?”

“Because it’s not like hitting hyperspace on a video game. When you punch through, you’re not randomly sent flying through space and time. It’s like you’re going through your own private door. A secret passageway that’s all yours. Only *you* can go through it because only *you* created it.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t create any—”

“Not you, literally. Like with a hammer and nails. But with every decision you make in your life, you leave the possibility open of slipping from one world to the next, from one set of decisions to another.” Luther paused for a second. The music in the room seemed to die down, the clinking of the glasses stopped, the conversation dimmed. “Everything that could ever happen already has. Every decision you didn’t make was made. Every life you didn’t live is being led, somewhere. There are an infinite number of Jeffs out there, the same as there are an infinite number of Lukes. The same as there are an infinite number of everyone in this room.”

Luther could tell he lost me.

“Look, do you ever have vivid dreams? Like, *really* vivid dreams?”

I nodded. “Sure, everyone does.”

“Well, that’s spillage from those other worlds. It’s your memory seeping over from one mind to another. What’s that thing that people always say about a dream? ‘I was in my house, but it wasn’t *my* house?’ Well, it *was*. It just wasn’t the house they have in *their* world. That house wasn’t where they were living, and yet they could *feel* it was theirs. It was just in a different world, one where they’d made different choices and different decisions.”

“Luke, hang on a second. This is *Alice in Wonderland* type stuff. This is insane.”

“Yes and no. Yes, it’s like *Alice in Wonderland*. No, it’s not insane. Meaning, insane in the sense that’s hallucinatory. It’s not. It’s real.”

I didn’t react to this. What could I say? In the silence, Luther took another long sip of his drink. Not knowing what else to do, I took another swig of mine and discovered most of the beer was still in the bottle and had turned warm.

“Okay,” he said, “let’s try this from another direction. You know that book, *Bright Lights, Big City*?”

“Sure, Jay McInerney. I’ve read it a few times.”

“Remember that first line? ‘You are not the kind of guy who would be in a place like this?’”

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, there’s a universe where, in fact, he *is* the kind of guy who would be in a place like that.”

Luther laughed; he was having fun again.

“How about *Less Than Zero*?”

“Sure, why?” I answered, somewhat defensively.

“Do you remember the opening of it?”

“Of course. ‘People are afraid to merge on the freeways in Los Angeles.’”

“Yeah, well,” Luther paused to take another quick swig. “In some universes, they absolutely *love* it. Just can’t get enough. Merge, merge, merge. That’s all that they do.”

“Okay, great, I get it. The Effects of Quantum Physics on Twentieth Century Literature. Sounds like a great course at NYU. And now I suppose you’re going to tell me that there’s a universe where *The Great Gatsby*’s not so great?”

“No, but there’s a universe where World War I didn’t end until 1922 and Fitzgerald’s unit was in fact shipped out. He went to the front line rather than to New York. He died in the trenches of Thionville in 1919, just outside of Luxembourg, with mustard gas in his lungs. He never published a word.”

Luther pulled out a package of cigarettes and started to smoke. Out of reflex I said, “You can’t smoke in here, not anymore.”

“You can, *here*.”

Luther said this in a way that implied he meant something other than just the basement at Treble. I looked at my watch; it was flashing twelve.

“Look, I’m sorry.” I tried to inject a laugh into my voice so that Luther wouldn’t think that I thought he was crazy, even though I did. “But I just don’t buy any of this. It’s just some crazy theory. It’s just all a bunch of words. You don’t have any proof.”

He grinned, took a deep drag off his cigarette. After exhaling he said, “I *knew* you were going to say that.”

“Really?” I asked, sarcastically. “And why’s that?”

“Because you said the exact same thing this morning.”

He reached into his grey blazer and pulled out an iPhone. He unlocked the screen and tapped it a couple of times. He then placed the iPhone on the table, in between our two drinks.

“How’s this for proof?”

The surface of the iPhone was filled with a photograph. It was of Luther sitting in the same exact spot as he was at that moment. Behind him the same waitress, Janice, was walking by carrying a tray filled with coffee cups; the center of her eye that showed had a red pupil. Sitting next to Luther, smiling, was me.

“When was this taken?”

“Today. Around one.”

“But I was at my desk at one. I’ve been at work all day. I didn’t even leave for lunch.”

Luther just shook his head.

“Jeff, it was you. *Another* you. He came in to talk about the same thing you wanted to talk about. We had pretty much the same conversation.” When I didn’t respond, Luther kept going. “He wanted to know what was going on, so I told him. Same as I just told you.”

“And then what happened?”

“He said it was bullshit, that it was just a bunch of words. Got up to leave. Said he needed proof.”

“Yeah, so?”

“I suggested we take a picture.”

This caused me to look down again at the iPhone. There it was, staring right at me: the same smile I’d seen in photographs my entire life.

“But that’s hardly proof. It’s just a picture you took with him.”

“Yes,” Luther said, picking up the phone. He flagged down one of the Janices and handed the iPhone to her. “And now *we’re* going to take a picture. You and me. His picture was *your* proof. Now, as soon as I email it to him, your photo will be *his* proof.”

He moved toward me, so close I could smell his aftershave. He put his arm over my shoulder. A few feet away Janice snapped the picture and said “Got it” just as the iPhone made an electronic clicking sound. She handed it back to Luther, looking bored. Behind her, another version of her holding a tray of empty glasses inched past in the small space between the two tables.

That night I was remote at dinner with my in-laws, exchanging only the smallest amount of small talk. I asked what Zachery had done that day (not much; sleep, play, eat) and we then chatted about the weather. Since I didn’t get home until after he went to bed, I went into Zachery’s room for a bit and just sat there, listening to him breathe. Grainne managed to call me from Heather’s and she could tell there was something wrong, even over the bad cell phone connection and the loud voices in the hotel bar where she was calling from. I blamed the haze in my voice on work, saying that I was slammed with meetings and that one of my longstanding projects had suddenly stalled. She was soothing and reassuring, telling me everything was going to be all right (her voice when she lulls Zachery to sleep sounds much the same). After we hung up I considered going back into Zachery’s room for another bout of calming, but instead I watched the late news and then tried to go to bed.

I tossed and turned for most of the night. When I couldn’t sleep I stared at the ceiling, trying to find shapes in the swirls of plaster. When I periodically dozed off I had bad dreams, nightmarish visions of a sea of mes, stacked and writhing like a ball of ants.

The next day I was tired and distracted. My morning meetings went by in a daze. Somebody asked me a question and I answered in shrugs and grunts, my voice—when I finally spoke—a monotone. By late morning I was back at my desk. I tried to do work but couldn't concentrate. So instead I wasted time on the Web, trying to find out more about my condition, trying to figure out if anything Luther had told me the day before could possibly be true.

During a Google search on parallel universes, I found a discussion page called Reading Matter on a British website about books for teenagers. The topic was a series of Philip Pullman novels I'd heard of but never read called *His Dark Materials*. Apparently the books—one of which was made into a movie with either Nicole Kidman or a lion that talks or both—involve parallel universes where characters slip in and out of other worlds. There were only a handful of comments from various kids, most of whom seemed to be in the UK, but one of the comments was really insightful. Steph, a fifteen-year-old from Nevada, posted the following on July 15, 2005:

*I really like reading books with parallel universes and consequently have a few ideas of my own. :)*  
*When I was little, I used to play a game called 'Ghost.' Here is an example: I had a choice between going to the kitchen for a snack and going into my bedroom to get my book. I chose to go to my bedroom, and did. While doing this, I pictured a 'ghost' of myself going to the kitchen. I tried to keep the picture in my mind as long as I could. For example, the second I picked up my book, my 'ghost' was opening the fridge door. As I looked for my place, the 'ghost' looked for something to eat. I wrote a story built around this concept and while it didn't turn out so great, this is my favorite way to look at parallel universes: the same people in the same situation making different choices. Picture it like a series of lines (like the staff in written music) all moving at the same pace. As they move,*

*they fluctuate differently. Sometimes the lines cross, sometimes they move parallel to each other. Those are the different worlds. That's the best I can put it into words so I hope it makes sense... :)*

It struck me that maybe Ghost is what had got me and the other two Jeffs into all this trouble and confusion in the first place. Maybe, in order to make up our minds on a big decision—like whether or not to have a family—we'd so thoroughly, so minutely, thought out the consequences and envisioned every eventuality that we'd somehow birthed those ideas into being. It seemed unlikely and far-fetched, but so did an appointment with my therapist where I was joined by two exact duplicates of myself. I was certainly willing to admit that my twins were real—they didn't dissolve into smoke when they touched something—but that didn't mean they hadn't begun their lives as something ethereal or imagined. No, we're not ghosts now, but maybe that's how we got our start.

I closed my eyes and decided to try an experiment. Using the girl's example, I came up with two scenarios for myself. The real me would get up, walk to the break room, get a cup of water, and then come back to my office. Meanwhile, I'd imagine my ghost taking the elevator to the lobby, exiting the building, and then walking north up Varick. Once the imaginary me was outside the building and on the sidewalk (it shouldn't take more than a minute), I would go to the window and see if I could spot my double down on the street.

I got up out of the chair and approached my office door. The break room was to the left and the short hallway leading to the elevator was on the right. The door would be the splitting point. I paused for a couple of seconds before exiting, taking a number of deep breaths. Finally, I began to walk slowly through the door, trying to measure any sort of tingling or lightness as I crossed the threshold.



Turning left, I walked slowly toward the break room while also trying to guide my other self—the ghost—to the elevator. This was difficult to do and required more concentration than I would have thought (forget walking and chewing gum; this felt like walking and chewing someone else’s gum for them by opening and closing their jaw by remote control).

I made it to the break room without running into any co-workers. This was good since, by then, my ghost was at the elevator bank pressing the *down* button. In the break room I grabbed a paper cup from the dispenser. In the corridor the elevator arrived and I got on. I filled up the cup and began to head back to my office. The coast was clear—the hallway was empty—so in the elevator I got a little cocky and began to chat with a young publicist I knew from a former company. Nothing too strenuous, just “Did you have a nice weekend? That’s nice. Me, too.”

I sat down in my office just as the elevator arrived in the lobby. I closed my eyes and concentrated on guiding the ghost out of the elevator and through the cavernous lobby. I found that my body, even as it was sitting in the chair, twitched and rocked as I walked my ghost through the revolving doors. It felt like pulling the strings of a marionette.

Now that he was on the street, I concentrated even harder than before. I tried to sense the breeze on his cheeks and the warmth on his face. I listened for the traffic. I twitched a bit more, my rhythmically rocking shoulders hopefully corresponding to the left-right-left movement of my ghost’s legs. *Here’s Varick, be careful. Watch for traffic.*

I got up quickly, to go to the window to check on my experiment: was I on the street while simultaneously standing on the second floor of my office building? Had I split, as Luther said the world did every time an option presented itself and you took one path instead of the other?

Right outside of my office, as I tried desperately to keep control of my ghost the same way you try and keep in your memory a phone number someone has told you, I ran into John, one of my programmers.

“Jeff, I’ve got to go to a meeting up on five about privacy policies for the website, so could you cover the weekly conference call with operations?”

“Wait, what?” Contact with my ghost, like a wireless signal extinguished, went dead. “John, no, I can’t. Sorry, but I’m busy.”

“Well, I’d like to go to both,” John said as I started to brush past him, “but I can’t be in two places at once.”

Just as he said this there was a ghastly sound outside on the street. First there were car horns and then screeching tires, followed by a sickening thump and metal on metal. After that, for a split second, there was eerie silence followed by screams.

Two temps, sitting near the window, said in unison, “Holy shit.”

Before I could get to the window, there was already a crowd obscuring the view. Running for the elevator, I fished Luther Blissett’s card out of my wallet, where I’d stashed it the day before.

Luther got there in no time. He’d been hanging out at Treble, which I guess was his informal office. As soon as he got my text which I’d sent from the lobby (JST SAW ME GET HIT BY CAR THINK IM DEAD COME QK), he called and told me to stay calm and that he was jumping into a cab. By the time he arrived, five minutes later, an ambulance had pulled up along with two NYPD police cruisers. I hung back about thirty feet, which was far

enough away so that people couldn't see my face but I could see through the crowd whether or not the Jeff who'd been hit by the car was up and moving. He wasn't.

"Okay, what happened?" Luther's demeanor was a total reversal from yesterday. Last night he was cool and laidback, detached and ironic. But at that moment, in the heat of a crisis, he was calm but focused. Somewhat in shock, I managed to blurt out what I thought had happened.

"I—I was in my office, upstairs." I pointed to the glass and silver building we were standing in front of. A huge American flag leaning from a post waved back and forth. "And I was picturing myself splitting, like—like you said. Like, one of me was going to stay sitting there, in the office, and the other me was going to walk up the block."

"Yes," calm; all business, "*and?*"

"And then someone spoke to me, a guy I work with. He kind of broke my train of thought, and that's—that's when I heard the accident."

"Okay, okay," Luther said quickly. By that time he was looking at the ground and not at me. "That doesn't make any sense in terms of a split. You can't just close your eyes and, *poof*, you have a twin." Luther then paused and glanced over his shoulder to the growing crowd. "But let me go check it out. You stay here. You got that? *Don't move.*"

I nodded as Luther walked slowly, approaching the growing crowd. I could see people covering their mouths in horror. One woman was crying. I could now see that, between the body lying inertly on the ground, two cars had smashed into each other. Steam was pouring out of one and Gatorade-green fluid was leaking out of the other. Luther walked around the scene twice. He was shaking his head, although I couldn't tell if he was doing that because he was really shocked or else was doing it merely for camouflage. He came back to where I was standing.

“Is it me?”

“Yes, it’s you,” Luther said quickly. He followed this with a *fuck* that was exhaled more than spoken. “Let’s get in a cab. You need to get out of here.”

Luther stepped onto Varick, raising his arm for a cab. He then split his fingers on his right hand and placed them in his mouth, whistling in that way I’d never been able to do. A taxi quickly pulled up and I numbly followed Luther, getting into the backseat as he held the door open. As we were pulling away, I saw a woman I worked with who had just passed the accident. Ours eyes met and hers turned from sad to confused. She’d seen me die, but had just seen me alive.

In a few minutes we were in front of Treble. Luther paid the driver and didn’t wait for change. He hustled me into the lounge downstairs, sat us both at his usual table, and snapped his finger at Janice for a pair of drinks.

“Listen, Jeff,” Luther began, his voice calm again. Soothing. “That was indeed you back there. And he’s dead. But he’s nothing that you created. At least, not today.”

“What do you mean? Then who was he?”

“The ambulance guys went through his wallet and I could see that it was a New York license. The address said West Ninety-sixth Street. When did you live there?”

“What? Ninety-sixth?” Our drinks arrived and I took a big gulp. It was a gin and tonic but all I could taste was the gin. “Years ago. Before I moved in with my wife.”

“When?”

“Let me think. That would have been from about ‘97 to 2003.”

Luther thought about this for a second.

“Okay, then. It’s simple. He’s just another one of you who has punched through to this world.” Luther took a sip, and then shrugged, reconsidering. “Or else *you’ve* punched through to *his*.”

“How would you be able to tell?”

“Are you wearing your watch?”

“What? No, I left it at home today. It’s broken...or something. All it does is flash twelve o’clock.”

“Then go to Ninety-sixth Street. See if you’re still living there. If so, he’s a version of you who never met your wife, who never got married and—apparently—wasn’t very good at crossing the street.”

“Okay, that explains that, *sort of*, but what was he doing there? If I didn’t create him and get him killed, what happened?”

Luther took another big sip of his drink. I wondered how much of his day was spent fielding questions like this.

“Maybe he was meeting someone for lunch in the area. Or he had a doctor’s appointment or something like that. I can’t really know for sure without knowing more about his life. But in terms of his getting hit by a car, well, this is New York. It happens all the time.”

“Yeah, but...” I started to speak but then stopped. What I was going to say sounded so crazy I almost couldn’t say it. “Most people in New York don’t get to see *themselves* get hit by a car. Usually it’s someone else.”

“Jeff, of course it happens,” Luther said, getting back to the boisterous mood he was in yesterday. “Hasn’t this little exercise taught you yet that *everything* happens?”

He patted me on the back and then ordered us another round. This time, doubles.

I RETURNED TO THE WAKEFIELD late on Saturday after telling Grainne on my way out of town that I'd be gone for at least another week. "I'll see you on Friday," I told her. "Friday," I repeated, thinking that that sounded plausible even though I had no idea if it was true. During the week I figured I'd operate out of the studio. This would make going into the office for my two required days easier and, since the Jeff who lived in the brownstone would be flying to California on Monday, I wouldn't be as distracted as I'd been before. No more spying, no more watching.

I actually felt indebted to Jeff, glad that he was going away and leaving me the block, the neighborhood, Manhattan. I'd have it all to myself. It felt like a Western when two guys meet at the opposite ends of the one street in town, hands circling over their pistols and ready to draw. One says to the other, "This town ain't big enough for the both of us." In this case, I was the victor. But when Jeff came back later in the week I'd be the one to get lost, heading back to Hoboken and the life I was forgetting how to live.

•

On Monday morning, I went into the office. I was nervous about what I might find since I hadn't been there for a week. But rather than returning to piles of mail and a stack of interoffice envelopes, my desk was clean and the only emails that were marked as *unread* were the half-dozen that had been sent over the weekend. All of my work had been taken care of and progress had been made on a couple of longstanding projects I'd been in the midst of working on.

During the day various people congratulated me for a brilliant presentation I'd done at a meeting the week before. I had no idea what they were talking about but I accepted their compliments anyway. In the break room a guy from production—as he was getting his lunch from the refrigerator—looked at me and said, “Jesus, Jeff, could you believe that shit on Thursday?” I nodded in agreement. But he kept going. “I mean, the fucking *nerve*, right?” “Right,” was all I could possibly answer.

In the afternoon I had meetings with my staff and a few conference calls with our tech team out in Massachusetts. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. For a few hours I happily lost myself in the routine. I almost called Grainne, checking in with her as I usually did, just to say hi and see what was for dinner. But I was supposed to be traveling and, since I hadn't really managed to come up with a good excuse for where I was, I decided not to call. Instead I did my work, answered emails, and even managed to scribble some notes for a new introduction to a paperback edition of my most recent book, *Print is Dead*. I worked late and, at seven, went back to the Wakefield.

•

On Tuesday, I slept in. I had ceased waking up in the studio startled and wondering where I was. I was getting used to this life, and that worried me. At ten I finally ventured outside and got coffee and a bagel. Around eleven, as I was finishing off the coffee and starting a new chapter of the Chandler novel, I got a call on my iPhone. I answered even though I didn't recognize the number.

"Is this Jeff?"

It was a man's voice; I didn't recognize that, either.

"Yes, that's me."

"Jeff Gomez?"

"Yes, can I ask who's calling?"

"It's Luther Blissett from *You're Familiar*," he said. "But you can call me Luke." In the background I could hear bits of conversation and crowd noise; he was in a bar or a restaurant. "I just wanted to verify a few things before we meet tonight."

"Sorry, I didn't know we were meeting tonight." I put down the book and sat up, the mattress squeaking as I did so. "Who is this again?"

"You mean, you don't know about our appointment?" The voice sounded concerned.

"What appointment?"

When he didn't speak, I could hear more clearly the voices in the background; many of them sounded the same.

"Jeff, uh—look," he finally said, somewhat gravely, "you'd better come see me. Right now."

"What, why? I don't even know who you are."

*"Trust me."* The way he said this made me trust him.



“Sure, fine. Where?”

He gave me the address of a restaurant in Soho called Treble. I took the last sip of my coffee, put down the paperback, and brushed my teeth. Then I threw on some shoes and a light jacket, grabbed my messenger bag, and hopped on the B train headed for downtown.

I'd been to Treble years ago, back in the '90s, and remembered where it was. This was handy since Soho was confusing, existing as it did off of the regular Manhattan grid. It was easy to get lost down there amidst the cobblestones and irregularly angled streets. The only problem was that Luther had told me to meet him in the downstairs lounge and I didn't remember Treble being on two floors. As I got off at Broadway/Lafayette and started walking west, I thought, *Maybe he meant Mercer Kitchen?*

When I got to Treble, I became nervous again. What exactly was I doing here? Who was this guy Luther and how did he get my number? I shoved all of those doubts somewhere else and, instead of worrying, skipped up the steps and went inside. All I could see was a small bar near the entrance and a dining room at the street level. I stood there, unsure of my next move. The bartender could tell I was confused. He called out to me, “You're here to see Luther, right?”

I nodded.

“Go through there.” He pointed to a sign that said EMPLOYEES ONLY. I walked up to it and gave it a push. It gave way and revealed a staircase leading down.

I walked down the steps and emerged in a dimly lit lounge. It took my eyes a moment to adjust. As the room came into clear focus, I noticed that the various tables were filled with a series of identical twins and triplets, all of them talking animatedly and having drinks and food. It hadn't been crowded upstairs, but the lounge was packed. As I slowly

moved through the room, I began to think that they weren't actually twins or triplets. I figured they were something else.

At one table, in the center of the room, sat a good-looking guy—probably a bit younger than me—with blond hair and stylishly dressed in a grey suit. He called out as I approached him.

“Jeff?”

The voice matched the voice on the phone.

“Luther?”

“Call me Luke,” he said, waving me toward the table. “Care for a drink?”

I nodded and he called over a waitress. Even she was a duplicate; there were three other versions of her moving through the room catering to the Xeroxed crowd.

“Vodka and tonic,” I said. “Just one.”

She gave me a smartass grin and then disappeared. I sat down.

“So,” Luther said, “something has happened to you recently, right? Something you just can't explain, no matter how hard you try?”

I nodded.

“You've seen something but you don't really know what it was you saw. Am I correct? Something that, by all rights, should be utterly impossible? And this has got you questioning every—”

I cut him off; this was sounding like a session with Dr. Schwartz.

“How did you know who I was?” There was an edge in my voice. “And who are all these other people?”

Luther at first looked angry, but quickly softened.

“They're people who are just like you.”

When he didn't elaborate, I moved on.

"Yeah, okay, but how did you get my phone number?"

"You gave it to me."

"No, I didn't. I don't know who you are. I've never seen you before and I didn't even know this lounge existed. I thought Treble only had one—"

"Sorry," he said, smiling. "I guess I should have been more specific. You indeed gave me your phone number. It just may have been *another* you."

Two weeks ago that statement wouldn't have made any sense but now, unfortunately, it did.

I replied quietly, "We were supposed to stay out of trouble this week."

"Not so easy, is it?"

My drink arrived and I took a sip the second it hit the table. It was strong.

"Don't sweat it," Luther continued. "It's tricky to get the hang of it. It'll take a while."

"You mean it's going to last? We're always going to be like this?"

He shrugged and said, "Don't you want to be?"

"No, of course not. It's—it's wrong. You always imagine what other versions of your life would be like, but you don't need to actually *see* them."

"It's a bit much, isn't it? Especially if you don't like the results."

I took another sip of the drink and thought about Jeff's son, Zachery, out in Montclair.

"It's even worse if you do."

Luther reached over and placed his hand on my back.

"It's hard," he said in a soothing voice. "I know."

I bristled at his touch and he removed his hand.

“Look, who the fuck are you? Why did you call me?”

He took a sip of his drink and crossed his legs.

“You called me, remember?”

“Okay, I get it. One version of me called you. But why did he do that?”

“Because I run a website for people like us. And I can help you with what’s going on.”

Something clicked in my mind. I remembered one of the other Jeffs mentioning this at our emergency therapy session last Friday.

“Yeah, I’ve heard of it. You’re Familiar, right? Facebook for split personalities.”

This seemed to wound him.

“Don’t say that. It’s not our personalities that have split.”

“Then what’s happened?”

“You’ve punched through to a parallel universe where you’ve come into contact with another version of yourself. That version is different based on choices he made. Choices different from the ones *you* made. That’s why he’s where he is in his life, and why you’re where you are in yours.” He paused and sized me up. “Now, maybe it’s that you took a job while he didn’t, or he called the girl he met in the bar while you chickened out. Whatever it was, those decisions made the same person different people.”

“So how do I get back? How do I make it stop?”

He shook his head; he didn’t think this was a serious question.

“You’re here. He’s here. Get used to it.”

I took a long sip of my drink. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d had alcohol before noon.

“Luther, please. I just want to know— ”

As I was talking, Luther glanced at something on me: my shirt or my hand. He interrupted me by saying, “You’re wearing a digital watch. Fantastic.”

“Yeah,” I said, glancing at my wrist. The watch was, once again, flashing twelve o’clock. “Not that it’s been doing me much good. It’s been screwed up for the past week or so. I don’t know why I still wear it. Habit, I guess. I should get a new one.”

Luther grinned.

“You’ll want to hang on to that one for awhile.”

“Why?”

“Because,” he said slowly and quietly. Leaning in to me, he smelled like his drink. “It’s the only way to tell where you *really* are.”

“What do you mean?”

He resumed his normal position. As he leaned back in his chair, I could hear it give a creak.

“Let me ask you this,” he said. “When did you first notice that your watch wasn’t telling time?”

I thought back over the past couple of weeks.

“Last Thursday. Right after I first saw the other version of me.”

Luther grinned again. He had a face that looked like it did that a lot.

“Well then, that’s about when you decohered.” He could tell he’d lost me, so he added, “It’s when you split, Jeff. Punched through to this world.”

“But why does that screw up your watch?”

“The truth is, your watch—even though it’s flashing—still knows what time it is. Back in your world that number exists and is counting up hours and minutes. We call that

your ‘true’ time. When you punched you were separated from your reality, and you lost your time along with it. Now, as long as *that* watch,” he paused to gesture toward my arm, “is flashing twelve o’clock, you’ll know that you’re in someone else’s world. You’re not in your own reality. Because of that, you need to be very careful and realize that things won’t be how you think they are or how you remembered them.”

“Meaning that in this world I might be a father or divorced, even though I’m neither of those things?”

“Something like that,” Luther said, popping peanuts into his mouth.

As he was chewing, I glanced at Luther’s right wrist. He was wearing a watch that had on its face a series of numbers, the order of which I couldn’t recognize.

“What’s that watch *you* have?”

“Oh, this?” He pulled his blazer sleeve up to his elbow so I could get a good look. The band was black leather and the casing was brushed metal, battleship grey. On its face, there were two pairs of digital numbers: two numbers in the first group, three in the second. The trio of numbers in the second set advanced at a pace that seemed faster than seconds. The time read 16:134, but quickly moved on to 16:135, 16:136, 16:137. Across the top, in futuristic script, it said HILBERT. “This is set for UMT. Universal Metric Time. This is the only kind of watch you can take back and forth.”

“Metric, why metric?”

Luther let out a lungful air before answering. His enthusiasm seemed to go in and out like a radio station.

“Because metric’s the only kind of time that’s not associated with any particular world.” One of the waitresses walked by with a tray full of drinks and winked at Luther. He paused to wink back. “Concepts like sixty minutes to an hour and twenty-four hours to a day

only make sense if you're on a planet revolving around our sun. In any universe besides this one there'd be no reason to keep track of time in any meaningful way, unless you wanted to measure duration the same way that you would measure distance. And since metric's a much better system for measuring things—a more *objective* method—we've found that it's the only way for people like us to keep accurate time.”

He looked at the numbers on his watch-face and I could see him, in his head, doing the conversion. A few seconds later he said, “About ten to twelve.”

There wasn't a clock in the room and my own watch didn't work, so I had to pull out my iPhone to check: 11:52 AM.

“That's right, but—wait a second. How come my iPhone has the correct time?”

He grabbed more peanuts and funneled them into his mouth. Chewing, he said, “Your iPhone doesn't rely on you to get the right time. It's getting that information from satellites and various other places. But that watch you're wearing depends on *you*. You're the one who set it. It's associated with you. And when you punch to another place, that time becomes like an anchor. You travel, but it doesn't.” He stopped talking long enough to swallow. “Anyway, this has a few other settings.” He pressed a silver stem on the side of the watch and a strange series of letters and numbers appeared: 0x7EDA. It looked to me like nonsense, a Captcha. “This is hexadecimal time. It also tells time in octal, base64, binary, and Mayan.” With that grin, I couldn't tell if he were kidding or not. “And, of course, it also has a regular setting.” He pressed the button again and the letters and numbers returned to just numbers. But the numbers it switched to were flashing twelve o'clock.

“So you're not in your own world, either?”

He shrugged and then grinned.

“No, but then you can't have everything.”

•

As I was leaving, Luther insisted on having our picture taken. It seemed an odd request, but I accepted. One of the waitresses—Janice, I think her name was—snapped it with Luther’s iPhone. When I asked what he was going to use the picture for, he said, “Proof.” He then grinned and gave me his card (it said “CEO and Founder, You’re Familiar, INC,” along with a cell phone number and email address).

Walking through Soho, headed back to the subway, I decided I wasn’t ready to go back to the Wakefield. I thought I’d head over to Other Music to do some record shopping, and then walk up Broadway to the Strand to look for used books. I didn’t find anything at Other Music, but at the Strand I found a nice used copy of *The Long Goodbye*. By that time it was late afternoon and I was getting hungry. I remembered a salad and sandwich place called Chopt up on Seventeenth Street and thought I’d head over there.

At Chopt I got in the queue just as it started to swell with the after-work crowd. By the time I’d been there a few minutes, the line was already out the door. I felt clever for timing my arrival just right.

As I stood there, trying to decide what I should get for dinner and whether I should eat it there or head back to the Wakefield, my iPhone vibrated. I’d just received an email. I pulled it out to see that it was from luke@yourefamiliar.com. This confused me for a second before I realized. *Luther, that guy from earlier.* There was no message, just an attachment. It was a photo of me and Luther, taken in the basement of Treble. Except it was a different photo. It wasn’t the picture that he and I took. Or rather, it was a different me. The Jeff in the photo was wearing different clothes and was clean-shaven. The crowd in the background was the same but different. They were still triplets and twins, but looked like different sets of



triplets and twins. The photo was time-stamped as having just been taken, and yet I was nowhere near Soho. I didn't know what this meant, but I didn't like it.

The next day, after a restless night spent tossing and turning on the air mattress, I emailed Luther and asked him what the hell was going on. He didn't respond until early evening, after I'd spent an entire day pacing around the shrinking confines of the studio apartment. The email he finally sent didn't answer any of my questions or address my concerns. This was all it said:

*From: luke@yourefamiliar.com*

*Subject: RE: what's the deal?*

*Date: October 7, 2009 4:48 PM EST*

*To: jeff.gomez@mac.com*

*You know what's going on.*

*And anyway, you have bigger things to worry about right now, don't you?*

*Click here if you don't know what I'm talking about:*

*<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/7/books/20gomez.html?ref=obituaries>*

I clicked on the link, which took me to the *New York Times* website, specifically to a page within the Obituaries section. On the screen there was a picture of me from the back of my first novel. The headline read *Jeff Gomez, Author of Our Noise, Dies at 39*.

At first I laughed, thinking this must be some kind of joke. It was a prank that either this Luther character or someone at the office, or maybe even one of the other Jeffs, was playing on me. It looked authentic, sure, but these days you could fake anything if you were inclined to do so. I decided to read the article for a laugh.

*Jeff Gomez, a writer who documented the lives, loves, and record collections of Generation X in his cult 1995 novel Our Noise, died today in a car accident in the Soho section of Manhattan at the age of 39. A California native who moved to the East Coast in his twenties, he was a longtime resident of the Upper West Side. Gomez turned to the professional side of publishing when his second novel, 1997's Geniuses of Crack, failed to attract the same audience as his first. He wrote two other novels, 2000's Young Americans, and 2003's Attempted Chemistry, but both received only limited distribution. He never married and is survived by his parents, Barbara Stallings of Moorpark, California, Edward W. Gomez of San Francisco, California, and his brother, Edward A. Gomez, of Los Angeles.*

If this was someone's idea of a joke, it wasn't funny. I read the obituary again, impressed by the level of detail it contained. Whoever had done this had certainly done his homework.

I went back to the *Times* website and tried to see if the article were real or a fake. I clicked into the main Obituaries page and there I was, near the bottom of the screen, sandwiched between an architect who had died at sixty-seven and a biologist who had passed away just three days shy of his ninetieth birthday. This all seemed and looked legitimate, but that didn't mean it made any sense. The Jeff that they described didn't match any of the others I'd met last week. There was no mention of Grainne, either as a wife or an ex-wife,

and there was no mention of Zachery. The fact that he lived on the Upper West Side meant that it could be the Jeff that lived in the brownstone across the street, but he was in California and thus couldn't possibly have been hit by a car in Soho. That it happened in the same neighborhood as my office building made me suspicious, but also convinced me that it really was me. If I'd been hit by a car in Queens or the Bronx, two places I never go, it would have seemed too out-of-context to be real. *But it was in Soho.* This made me think back to Luther and that crazy scene in the downstairs lounge at Treble. Could he somehow be involved?

I went back to my email and responded to Luther's last message, writing only, *What the fuck is this?* He responded instantly: *You're dead. Deal with it.* And again, as a sign-off, *Call me Luke.*

Thursday was my day to go into the office, but I figured I had a good excuse not to: I was dead. So instead of getting up and taking a shower and heading to work, I stayed wrapped up in sheets on the air mattress. All I did after I woke up was stare up at the ceiling. I didn't know what to do, or how to feel.

I was sane enough to know that I wasn't really dead. I'd long since realized that whatever craziness was happening with the other two mes, none of us were ghosts or shadows, figments of anyone's imagination. But that didn't solve the question of who exactly had been killed yesterday. If it wasn't me or the other Jeffs I'd just met, then who was it? One line from the obituary kept coming back to me: *A longtime resident of the Upper West Side.* I'd lived there for a while, first on Ninety-sixth Street and then with Grainne for a few years on Seventy-seventh Street. The other Jeff, the divorced one who'd moved into the

brownstone across the street, moved back to the Upper West Side after a three-year hiatus in Hoboken. But would all that count? Would it be enough to make him a “longtime resident” of the area? I didn’t think so. I would had to have stayed on the Upper West Side, in an unbroken stint, for more than a decade. To achieve this I would had to have stayed in that Ninety-sixth Street apartment this whole time. No moving to Hoboken or Montclair. But to do that I would have to be yet another version of me, one who—seven years ago—never went out with Grainne that first time. We must have never met, never fallen in love, and—because all of that never happened—I never left Ninety-sixth Street.

As I turned over, I remembered something about the apartment on Ninety-sixth Street. *The key.* I’d always been paranoid about getting locked out, so I’d stashed an extra key in a tiny crevice above the doorjamb. I never had to use it in the eight years I lived there, but I was always glad to know it was there if I needed it. I’d removed the key when I moved out five years ago, but if some version of me was still living there—and had never moved out—then the key must still be there. Figuring I had nothing to lose, I decided to pay my old apartment a visit.

I walked the twenty blocks, needing the exercise after the last week of junk food and doing nothing but sitting in the chair watching the other Jeff. As I headed north on Columbus, a street I used to know really well, I only half-noticed the various changes: the businesses that were gone and the new ones that had taken their place. At Ninety-sixth I turned left, walking slowly, heading west towards Amsterdam. I used to live on the second floor so if the blinds were up, I’d be able to see into the apartment and make sure it was still mine.

The building was huge; it took up almost half the block. The blinds were indeed up in my old apartment and from the sidewalk I could see a few pieces of art on the walls, things that only I could own. I also spotted the side of a white couch I owned years ago. It looked like I still lived there, so I crossed the street.

As I approached the building, I remembered that I'd also need a key to unlock the main glass doors outside of the lobby. Through the doors I saw a guard sitting behind a desk. I considered pleading with him to let me in, saying I'd lost my key and that I lived in apartment 2E. Maybe he'd even recognize me and let me in without asking any questions. But then again, he could have seen my obituary in the *Times*. It didn't seem worth the risk. Thankfully, just as I was a few steps away from the doors, I saw an old man coming out of the building, exiting the lobby with an overstuffed shopping bag. I used this as cover and walked in just as he was going out. I shielded my face as I passed the guard. He didn't stop me or seem to recognize who I was.

I ran up the stairs to the second floor, not wanting to wait for the elevator. The key was exactly where I'd left it years ago. It was covered in dust and dirt from years of hiding, but otherwise seemed okay. I brushed it off and put it in the lock and then turned, holding my breath. It worked.

I walked in quickly and shut the door behind me. The apartment was in shadows, but even in the half-light I could tell that nothing had changed. For a few seconds I didn't move. It felt like I'd snuck into a museum after hours, that the apartment was an exhibit in some sort of retrospective of my life. On a wall outside this room it would say on a little plaque GOMEZ'S APARTMENT 1997-2004. Except this was real; somebody lived here. *I* lived here.

I switched on a light. The room looked more or less how I'd left it years ago. The same couch, coffee table, rug, bed. The only things new that I could spot were the flat screen TV and a couple of paintings.

I turned to the bed. It was unmade and around it were a few dirty clothes on the floor. On the nightstand, with a bookmark sticking out about halfway, was a used paperback copy of *Farewell, My Lovely*.

On a short bookcase, next to a cordless phone and answering machine, was a wooden box I instantly recognized. I'd bought it years ago at a thrift store when I still lived in California. I'd always used it for my keys and watch and wallet and other assorted stuff. Whenever I came home, the first thing I would do would be to empty the contents of my pockets into this box.

I walked over to the box and opened it. Keys, watch, and wallet were gone. I guessed I'd had them on me when I was hit by the car. I didn't know if my family would ever get them back, or if they'd been irreparably damaged in the crash.

The box contained plenty of other things, detritus from a dozen days of work and nights out: mints, sticks of gum, business cards, a ring I no longer wore, a few spare keys, phone numbers scribbled on scraps of paper, a small lock for my luggage. Among the business cards were a few that looked familiar; on one I spotted the red logo of the company I'd worked for before I took my current position. I picked it up, surprised to see my name on it. This was my business card. Looking closer, I saw that it was the same title—the same job—I'd had all those years ago.

I went into the bathroom, looking for an extra toothbrush or some feminine products in the medicine cabinet. I found neither. In the closet I saw only men's clothes. There weren't any skirts or blouses a girlfriend had stowed here for the nights she stayed

over. I checked the dresser, seeing if a drawer contained spare panties and bras—evidence of a long-term girlfriend—but all the drawers were filled with my own clothes.

Walking back into the main part of the studio, I was overcome with sadness. If nerve was how you grew, and fear is why you stayed the same, what was this version of me afraid of? And why hadn't I been afraid of it, too? How had I managed to shake it while this Jeff just stood there, shaking? I wondered if it was too late. Could I give him another chance? If I'd indeed broken through to this world, to *his* world, then I could conceivably go to work tomorrow as him. I could explain away the obituary in the *Times* as a case of mistaken identity, saying it was all just an existential error. I could sit down at his desk. I would pick up his phone, answer his emails, go to meetings I found in his calendar. From there I would start making bigger decisions: leave this apartment that I'd grown out of years ago, look for a job with a new company, try to meet a woman and be happy. Over time I'd transcend this life, breaking out of this rut. Could it be done, or would I just be struck down the same as he was? If not by a car, then maybe in a plane crash or by a disease; cancer would come calling and I'd have no choice. Maybe this world just wasn't meant to be ours.

Suddenly, I heard something. A key in the door caused me to jump. It was a small apartment, but I managed to duck into the closet and close the door. It was cramped; a bunch of shoes were scattered at my feet and dress shirts buried my face. When the front door opened, I felt a gust of cool air from the air-conditioned hallway enter the closet. From the sound of the feet on the floor, it seemed as if two people had entered the apartment.

“Here you go, Mr. Gomez,” It was a male's voice; I didn't recognize it. He sounded official. I then heard the metallic music of a large number of keys clanging into each other. This must have been the super letting someone in. “You take as long as you need. I'll be right outside.”

The door quietly closed but someone was still there, even though they made no noise. Then, quiet at first, I heard something. Weeping. I looked through the closet door, opening it just enough to get a view but not enough to get me spotted. Standing in the center of the studio was my father.

He was wearing jeans with a Blackberry attached and a Hawaiian print shirt, probably from Tommy Bahama; he loved those. He's a lot bigger than I am. I'm six feet but he's six foot three, and maybe fifty pounds heavier. As he wiped his eyes I could see the silver from his bracelet with the magnets that he wore to help with a bad back. He reached into his pocket for a handkerchief and blew his nose loudly.

I didn't have any relatives in the New York area, so maybe the NYPD had needed someone to identify the body. I bet that he'd handled the grim task with dignity and composure. Maybe too much composure. I could see him chatting with the coroner before or after, asking for restaurant recommendations or talking about the Yankees.

He was in the studio, I guessed, to gather some of my belongings. He didn't have any movers with him, or boxes, so this couldn't have been the big move, the clearing out of all my stuff. So maybe that's not what this was. Maybe dad just wanted to see my apartment one last time, wanted to see some aspect of me in better shape than I must have been after the car hit me.

The first time he'd been here was 1997, the first year I lived in New York. I was still in my twenties back then, sullen and angry. I didn't keep up contact with him after I moved. When he called that April to wish me a happy birthday, I let the machine pick up and never returned his call. After this he wrote me letters and I never wrote back. I wasn't testing him or mad about anything in particular. I just wanted to get away from all of that. I'd traveled 3,000 miles to start a new life, and all that was happening was that my old life kept trying to



follow me. That August he left me a message saying he was coming to New York the weekend after Labor Day. He didn't have any reason to be in town. It wasn't a business trip or even a vacation; he just wanted to see me. He followed up with a letter saying that he'd be staying at the Waldorf and I could choose to see him or not, but he hoped that I would. This impressed me. I'd been upping the ante all year with my silence, and he was finally calling my bluff. That first night we went to dinner and he asked me how the second novel was going. "Is it still going to come out?" he asked. The question showed just how big the gulf was between us. The book was due to be published in just a couple of weeks, and yet he seemed to know nothing beyond the fact that I'd signed the contract. I told him yes and then pulled a finished copy out of the messenger bag I'd begun wearing everywhere. He was only mildly impressed until he opened it to the third page and saw the dedication: *For my father*. In an instant he sort of crumbled. He was then so proud he puffed up in the chair; he seemed to grow a size. He showed the waitress when she brought us our lasagnas (I'd ordered what he was having) and she clearly didn't care. What was cute was that her disinterest didn't register with dad; he was oblivious. He was happy. The rest of the weekend we did touristy things and had a good time doing them. On Saturday night we went to the Oak Bar in the Plaza and got shit-faced over the course of several hours. We smoked cigars and ordered round after round and it was wonderful. That was the weekend of the funeral for Princess Diana, who had died the week before. I remember the round-the-clock coverage only through the prism of my round-the-clock hangover. Dad left on Sunday, and by then our relationship had been patched up.

Now, over a decade later, he was back. His return to the apartment seemed fitting; he'd reached out to me all of those years ago, closing the gap between us through his sheer force of will, and now he was doing it again.

He regained his composure only to look around the apartment and heave once more. He shuffled across the room and sat down at my desk. For a minute he didn't move, and then he hit the spacebar on my computer and moved the mouse around a bit. I guess he was trying to wake it up. It didn't wake up. He then got up from the desk.

I heard him go into the kitchen, take a glass out of the cupboard, and fill it up with water. He came back into the studio and sat down on the bed. As he drank from the glass of water, I knew that he was wishing he had something stronger. He looked around at all my possessions, the books and CDs and the artwork on the wall. He had a puzzled look on this face. I wondered if he were humming to himself the song, "Is that all there is?" Dad finished the water and walked back to the kitchen, placing the glass in the sink.

On his way out of the apartment I watched as he grabbed a small stuffed bear I'd bought from Ikea years ago. He curled the bear under his arm like a football player cradling the ball and about to head down the field in a rush for yards. He opened the door and I heard a voice, the voice from before, say, "You okay, Mr. Gomez? You get everything you need?" My dad sniffled and then, in his deep voice—which sounded even deeper than usual on that day—he replied, "Yes, thank you."

I waited ten minutes before emerging from the closet. When I did, I noticed that the apartment was filled with the smell of my dad. I didn't know what to do, so I left. I put the spare key back in its place, walked slowly down the stairs, and exited the building.

I was shaking as I walked down Ninety-sixth Street. Reading about my own death had been one thing, but seeing my dad react to my death was even worse. I couldn't bear to

think about the pain in his face, how his whole body was slumped. My dad always looked to me like an exclamation point but today he'd been reduced to a question mark.

I fished out my iPhone and looked up his cell phone number from the contacts. I was about to press the button, to call him, but figured that was too cruel. It would only freak him out, the same as if I'd whispered something to him back in the apartment. He would think I was a ghost and, rather than assuage his guilt or make him feel better, it'd only haunt him. I figured he was probably haunted enough already.

Thinking back to all of the trips he'd made to New York to visit me over the years, I thought about the Waldorf. It was a nice hotel and, even though I felt it was past its prime, dad loved it. He loved the history and romance of the place, the fact that you could get into a cab and say simply, "Take me to the Waldorf." You couldn't do that with the Sheraton or Hilton. (Or, hell, maybe you could. I don't know. I'd never tried). As I kept walking, crossing Columbus, I figured that he was in a cab at that moment, headed back to the Waldorf. I had no reason to believe he'd be staying anywhere else.

I decided to pay him a visit.

At Central Park West I went underground, reemerging at Rockefeller Center. I then headed east, the Midtown-jamming tourists segueing into the swarm of businessmen crowding the sidewalks of Madison and Park Avenues. As I walked down Forty-eighth Street, I could suddenly see the Waldorf on the other side of Park. On the far corner its uniformed doorman was out front putting guests in cabs and Lincoln Town Cars. The three banks of revolving doors looked like the windows of a slot machine.

The last time dad had stayed here by himself had been in 2004, when Grainne and I were just dating. The first photo of them together was taken by me, standing in front of a mantel in one of the Waldorf's suites. In the picture Dad looked proud and Grainne looked as if she were wondering what she'd gotten herself into.

I walked up the steps of the Waldorf cautiously, not wanting to run into my dad on his way in or out. The first part of the lobby was mostly empty, a few people sitting in chairs and couches, reading or waiting for someone. In the main lobby, with its high ceilings, dark wood, and pillars of marble with gold accents, bellboys pushed huge trolleys filled with expensive-looking luggage back and forth. Over the piped-in classical music you could hear the *ping* of elevators arriving, one set leading to the towers while another set around the corner led to the rest of the hotel. Behind a long counter immaculately dressed young men and women were handing out and collecting keys that—these days—were actually plastic cards with magnetic strips. Bills were signed, rooms were upgraded, limos were called. I approached the counter, unsure I wanted to go through with any of this.

“Can I help you, sir?”

She was young, with brown hair.

“Yes, my dad checked in last night. Can you tell me what room he's in? His name's Ed Gomez.”

She looked puzzled, her knitted brow asking the question, *If you're his son, then why don't you know what room he's in?*

I jumped into the silence, saying, “We were going to meet up tonight, but I got off work early so I thought I'd come by and surprise him.” This wasn't having the effect I wanted, so I added, “You see, it's his *birthday*.” It was true what they said: once you'd told a lie, it was easy to keep telling them.

“Well, that’s just lovely,” she said. She punched his name into her computer and then read to me from the screen. “Your dad is staying in suite 528. You can take the elevators right around the corner.”

“Much thanks,” I said. Pouring it on, I added, “You’ve just made dad’s day.”

I went to the elevators, passing the rare book dealer who had a small outpost in the corner of the lobby. A cover caught my eye as I was waiting, a first edition of *The Lady in the Lake*. An elevator arrived and I got on. At the fifth floor I slowly exited, still not sure what I was doing. I walked down the hall and, after a few twists and turns, found 528. The hallway was eerily quiet. I couldn’t hear voices, televisions, or even vacuums being pushed back and forth. Where *was* everybody?

I knocked on the door, fighting the urge to flee immediately after. The sound of my knuckles on the wood echoed down the hallway. Dad didn’t answer. I listened at the door for a mumbled voice or footsteps. Nothing. I went downstairs.

Back in the lobby, I checked a small bar named Peacock Alley that I knew he liked. I peaked inside, but it wasn’t open yet. I then figured that he might be at the bar in the Bull and Bear, a stock market-themed steakhouse that was attached to the hotel and which was probably open since they served lunch. I’d been there with dad a few times, for drinks and dinner, and knew that he liked it; it was his kind of place.

Instead of walking through the hotel and taking an escalator down to the Bull and Bear, I decided to backtrack through the lobby so I could approach the bar from the street. I went back out to Park Avenue and headed east down Forty-eighth Street. By then it was almost five o’clock and the streets were filling up with people who’d left their offices a bit early, getting a head start on the night.

I turned left at Lexington, edging my way up the block slowly. After just a few steps I was outside the Bull and Bear. Through the window I could see my dad at the bar, nursing a drink I was sure was Glenlivet Scotch. He looked huge hunched on the barstool, his head hanging down so low his chin almost touched the top of the bar. The place was empty, not yet invaded by the after-work crowd. It was just him and the bartender. I watched as he finished his drink and motioned for another.

I wanted to go in there, to talk to him, to show myself to him and thus erase the need for the alcohol he was using as anesthesia. But my nerve from earlier—from upstairs—had gone. I was anchored to the sidewalk. I then thought of calling him, of at least letting him hear my voice. That way I could say goodbye. The last time I'd spoken to him was about a month ago. Lately I'd been remiss in our usual Sunday night calls, and it'd been so long since one of them that I couldn't remember what our last conversation had been like. Had I said "I love you" before hanging up? Usually we did, but sometimes one of us forgot.

I didn't want to risk it; didn't want my dad haunted for the rest of his life by the knowledge that he never got to say goodbye. Calling him would have meant haunting him in a different way, but it seemed to me the lesser of two evils.

I pulled the iPhone from my pocket and again found his number in my directory. I had a clear view of him through the glass. I watched as he ordered his third drink in ten minutes. I could even see the Blackberry hanging off of his jeans.

The phone rang in an instant, sounding hollow in my ears even though it was a good connection. Across the street, dad was motionless. He sipped his drink in quick gulps but didn't react to the buzzing or ringing that should have been—must have been—taking place on his hip. And then he answered.

"Kid, what's up?" His deep voice was chipper and alive.

Across the street, dad didn't move. His Blackberry was still stuck in its plastic holder and affixed to his leather belt.

"Jeff, you there?" he asked again.

"Hey, pop...how are you?"

"I'm fine. Are you okay? You sound shaken. Everything all right, kid? Is Grainne okay?"

He knew who Grainne was, and he didn't think I was dead. Plus, he was speaking to me while the dad across the street continued to sit and order yet another drink. This wasn't a ventriloquist act; across the street was a different dad. He was the father to the Jeff who had been killed yesterday. The dad I had on the phone, who was sitting in his office in San Francisco—the way the one in the Bull and Bear would have been if he hadn't gotten that phone call last night from the police—was my father. He knew his son to be childless but married, as well as alive. I then realized I could do nothing for that dad across the street. In his world—which I had somehow stepped into—his son was dead. There was nothing I could do to change that fact. I was just a tourist.

"We're fine, dad," I said, beginning to cry.

"Hey, kid, hey, what's the matter? Talk to me, big guy."

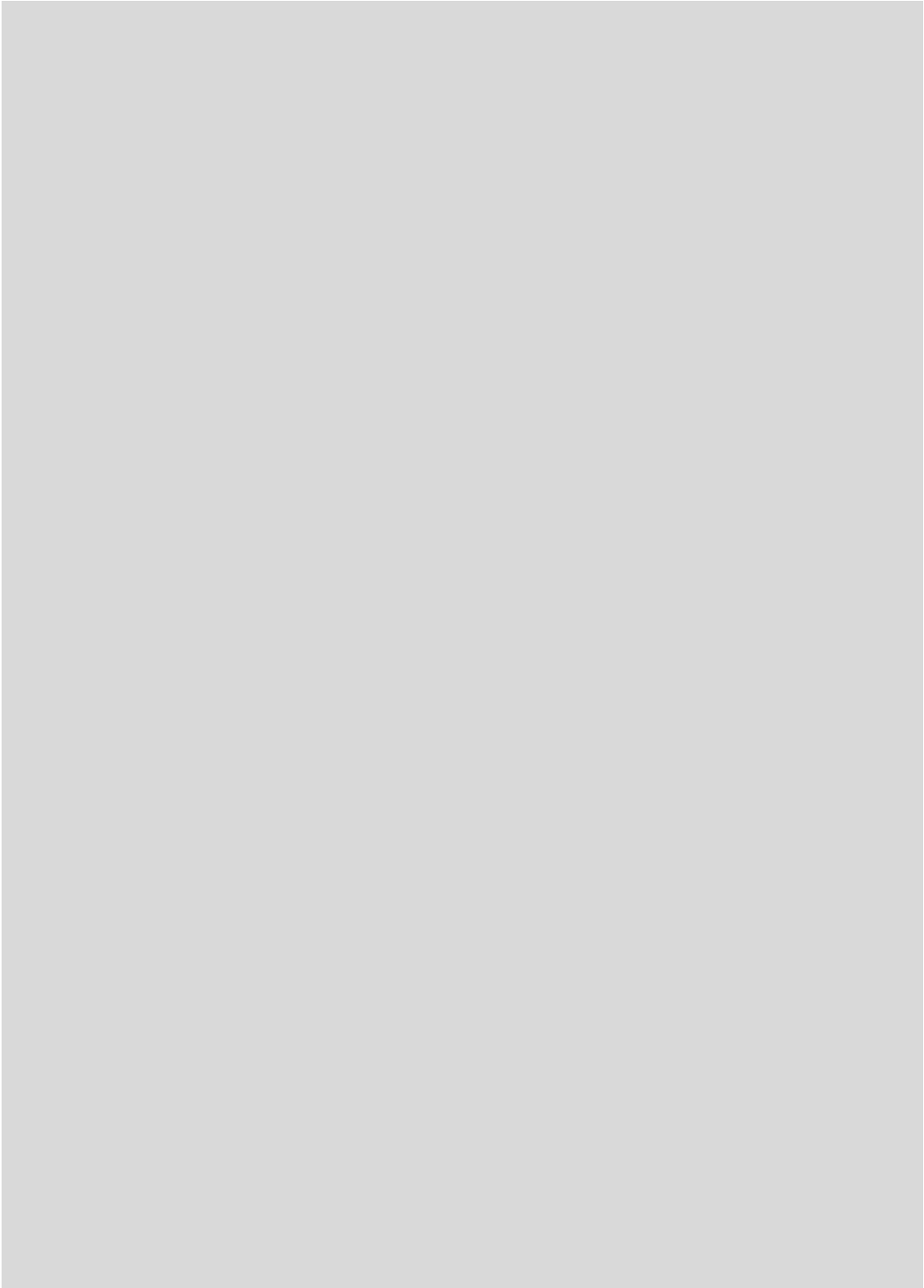
"Dad, I can't." By now I was openly weeping, shoulders hunched and gasping for air; tears streamed down my face. "I'll call you later, dad. It's nothing, really. I just wanted to hear your voice."

"Okay, okay," he said quickly, sounding helpless and frustrated by the distance between us. "But if you need anything, you call me, okay?"

"Yes, dad," I said, and then hung up. "Yes, dad," I repeated, though he could no longer hear me.

Across the street the other dad continued to sit there, not knowing that I was just outside of the bar; not knowing that I was so close by. If he would have turned his head he could have seen me, my tear-soaked face visible through the glass. But he never looked up once while I was there. He just kept staring into his succession of drinks. I put the iPhone back in my pocket and walked away.





IT WAS QUIET on Seventy-fourth Street as I headed to Dr. Schwartz's office on Friday morning. Most of the office workers were already on their way to their offices, leaving only mothers pushing strollers, students heading to class, and the occasional commuter who'd slept in strolling the sidewalk. Most importantly, I didn't spot anyone who looked exactly like me.

I had planned on being purposefully late to the get-together with the other Jeffs, since it would have been awkward if we were all seen entering at the same time. I suppose we could have played it off as us being either twins or triplets (depending on how many of us there were), but I was so exhausted from the craziness of the week that I knew I wouldn't be able to muster a convincing act for whoever might spot us and want or need an explanation. Then I thought, *What if one of the other mes is having the same idea? We'd both show up late and it would still look strange.* So I decided to be early. But then I figured that if I was having that thought, one of the other Jeffs was probably having it, too. I finally gave up and decided to try and be there on time.

I pressed number 52 on the silver panel of numbers and then checked my watch, only to find it again flashing twelve o'clock. After a few seconds Dr. Schwartz buzzed me in.

I got off the elevator and walked down the hall. The door was slightly ajar and I could hear voices inside. Dr. Schwartz was speaking to someone. I thought that maybe I was early after all and that he was still in his previous session. But when he stopped speaking and I heard my own voice coming from inside his office, I shrugged. I opened the door and saw myself sitting in the green chair that sat in the middle of the room. When Jeff saw me, he acknowledged my presence with a tilting of the chin, a silent sort of, *Hey, what's up?* I returned the nod and moved across the room, sitting on the couch.

It was shocking how blasé I'd managed to become in such a short time. A week ago the sight of two other mes crammed into Dr. Schwartz's office had filled me with amazement and dread, but now I was just mildly annoyed. After a few minutes of tense silence, the buzzer rang and we were then joined by the third me. He sat at the desk in the corner.

"I thought I'd be late," Jeff said as he entered, "so we didn't all run into each other by getting here at the same time."

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "I had that idea, too."

"Then why weren't you late?"

"Because I figured that if I could have the idea then you'd probably be having it, too. So I was on time."

Jeff, sitting in the green chair, chuckled. He said, "That's why I was early."

Dr. Schwartz raised his hands in order to both silence us and to begin the session. "So," he said, clapping his hands together, "how did it go this past week?"

No one wanted to speak. Finally, I did.

“Mixed results,” I said.

Dr. Schwartz just stared, moving from face to face, so I added, “You didn’t see the *Times*?”

His face dropped a little; he didn’t like to be caught off guard.

“No, what happened?”

In comical unison, the three of us answered at once: “We died.”

Dr. Schwartz looked puzzled, so the Jeff sitting at the desk explained how one of us had been killed. I quickly added that it was yet another Jeff, one who lived on Ninety-sixth Street and was a version of us from seven years ago, from before we met Grainne and branched off into the permutations now filling the office. Dr. Schwartz nodded and tried to stay calm, as if he heard this kind of thing all the time. *Yes, of course. Another Jeff. Makes perfect sense.* For only the second time since I’d known him—the first time being last week—he grabbed a notepad and began writing.

“So, you can see,” I said, “the stakes are getting pretty high.”

Another Jeff added, “I’d say so. Life or death.”

I wanted to bring up California, or dad, or Luther in the downstairs lounge at Treble, but I didn’t. Things were confusing enough.

“Look,” Dr. Schwartz said, finally getting control of his emotions. “I don’t know how any of this happened, physically speaking, but we need to try and start figuring out *why* this happened.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, we need to consider that something may have triggered this. Set all of this in motion.”

“Like what?”

“Like, maybe something in each of your lives brought it about. Maybe you’re all unsatisfied in some way. Or you wondered what your life would have been like if only you’d made different decisions.”

“Yeah, we *know* all that now,” I said. “But how did that lead to us splitting into three different people and ending up here?”

He considered this, and finally answered.

“Perhaps the psychic energy you were each expending was so strong that it, I don’t know, caused a rip—or a breach—in time and space. And that bridge somehow connected you to each other, allowing you to each be able to glimpse what your lives would have been like if only you’d made different choices.”

“I would say,” I said, “we’ve been given more than just a *glimpse*. I mean, what do you call—”

Another me interrupted, exasperated. “Yeah, okay, great. A rip in time, whatever the fuck that means. It’s *Big* and *Freaky* fucking *Friday* all rolled into one. But *now* what? We’ve seen what our lives are like. We’ve seen the different outcomes. So why don’t we just go back to normal? Why won’t the movie end?”

“Yeah,” I said and then pointed at the other two Jeffs, who each stared back at me blankly. Was my face really that long? “What are *they* still doing here?”

Dr. Schwartz thought about this for a few seconds.

“Maybe because you really *haven’t* seen what your lives would have been like.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Dr. Schwartz began, “you’ve certainly come into contact with each other, and you know the surface details of the differences between yourselves and your other lives. You know that you still live in Hoboken, or else that you live on the Upper West Side, or up

in Montclair. But you really haven't *experienced* that life. And maybe that's the final thing that needs to happen."

"So this is all going to end up like some kind of *To Kill a Mockingbird* thing?"

Dr. Schwartz said, "Meaning what?"

I answered, knowing exactly what Jeff meant. "That you can't know about someone until you walk a mile in their shoes."

"Hell," I said, looking down at the shoes I was wearing: black Adidas Sambas. The me sitting on the couch was wearing the same kind. "We're walking in the same shoes *now*."

"Yeah, Dr. Schwartz," the other me began, the one not wearing Adidas. "I'm not sure we punched a hole in the universe just to learn that the grass isn't always greener."

Dr. Schwartz sat there. When there was only one of me, he never seemed to have much to say. Now that there were three of us he seemed to have even less to say.

"That may be, *Jeffs*, but I still think that something *caused* this rip. *Something* has caused you to overlap, to see the lives and worlds of the other. It wasn't random. It couldn't be. It had to be for some purpose, and there's got to be a reason it happened *now*. It started at some point and, unless we investigate the causes for *how* this happened, we'll never know how to end this."

We all considered this.

"You mean we could *stay* like this? Forever?"

"Look at it this way," Dr. Schwartz said, "you're in a maze and now you need to find your way out."

As Dr. Schwartz was talking, I examined a painting that was on the wall behind and above him. It was an outdoor scene, a courtyard or garden in pastels done in the style of Matisse. I wished I were there now, losing myself among the trees and scented flowers. I

then looked more closely at the painting, seeing the various paths in the picture: three of them joining in the center and then branching out, traveling in different directions.

“Guys,” I said, “I think we have to at least consider what he’s saying.”

Dr. Schwartz nodded, a smile creeping to his lips.

“Maybe,” he said, “facing the other outcomes will somehow resolve this.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“That you all trade places.”

“*What?*”

“For how long?”

“And who goes where?”

“In terms of length,” Dr. Schwartz said, “it shouldn’t be long. It sounds like you got into enough trouble this past week.”

“So then,” I said, “for a weekend?”

“Too dangerous,” I replied.

“How about, then, just a night?” I suggested.

All four of us nodded; that sounded about right.

“Okay, but that doesn’t settle everything. Who goes where?”

I was the first to answer. I said, “I want to see Grainne.”

“Fine, you can trade places with me. Which one are you again?”

I hung my head and replied, “I’m the one who got divorced.”

“I’d like to see,” I said, but stopped. I almost said “My son,” but he wasn’t really *my* son, was he? “I’d like to see Zachery. And I swear I won’t do anything weird. I won’t go all *Raising Arizona*, I promise.”

I nodded. I knew more than anyone what I was capable of, and I wasn't capable of that.

"Then that leaves me," I said, "to be a bachelor for a night."

Dr. Schwartz, looking smug, then announced, "So then, it's agreed?"

We all nodded.

"Okay then, how do we do this?"

"Let's meet tomorrow morning at the Malibu Diner in Hoboken. At ten."

"What, why there?"

"I'll need to drive the car down so you can drive it back up to Montclair. I don't want to drive it into the city. You know that we don't really like driving."

"Yeah, you're right."

"I'll come with directions and I'll give you the keys and all that."

"Fine."

"And what about me?"

"Same for you. We'll all meet there, and I'll give you my keys and you'll give yours to him."

"Okay, but we'd all better wear the same thing. I can't leave the house on Saturday morning wearing jeans and come back wearing shorts. Grainne will get suspicious."

"Fine. Everybody wear Levis, the Adidas Sambas, a blue Fred Perry polo, and a black digital watch. Got it? I don't think we need to get down to the level of underwear and socks, do we?"

We all shook our heads.

Dr. Schwartz then leaned toward us and said, "But what about Sunday?"

We all thought about this.



“Central Park,” I said.

“What?” I asked. “Why?”

“Hey, it’s fair,” I defended.

“Fine. But where?”

“Bethesda Fountain. One of those benches down near the plaza. Let’s meet at eleven. That’ll give us all some time to get down there.”

“What do we tell Grainne?”

“Just make something up.”

There was silence for a few seconds until I leaned forward and said, “Agreed?”

The other two considered this, and then said together, “Agreed.”

After we said this, a thought occurred to me.

I asked, “What if this doesn’t work?”

Dr. Schwartz started to speak but I cut him off.

“We’ll cross that path,” I looked at the painting, and then at the other two Jeffs,  
“when we come to it.”

## 3. Trading Places

I WALKED AWAY from the Malibu Diner, heading for a bus stop down the street where I could catch the 126 into Manhattan. As I crossed Fourteenth, jaywalking to the north side, I turned and watched as one of the Jeffs headed south down Park Avenue. He had his hands stuffed into his jeans and I noticed—as he walked—how pigeon-toed I am. Just a few feet away the other Jeff got into Grainne’s Jetta, started it up, and pulled out of the diner’s small parking lot. The silver Volkswagen then merged with the traffic on Fourteenth and began to drive away. I could see my own eyes in the rearview mirror as the Jetta disappeared. After the car was out of sight, I turned back toward Park Avenue, watching Jeff head south until he finally turned left at Tenth and disappeared. I glanced down at my watch, only to find it still flashing twelve o’clock.

There was no one else at the bus stop. I entered the small enclosure, leaned against an ad for riverfront condos, and tried to enjoy the breeze that blew into my face. The morning had brought the first cool day in a long time. It was still sunny but no longer hot. Traffic lazily went by in both directions on Fourteenth.

The bus arrived and, when it did, I fished the fare out of my pockets and got on. I took out my iPod and pressed *shuffle*, leaned against the window, and then closed my eyes. As the bus coasted through the Lincoln tunnel I tried not to think about Grainne and Zachery in Montclair. Yesterday I'd picked her up from the airport, finally back from the exhausting weeks with Heather. It felt like months since I'd seen her, and then—after just one night together—I was leaving them; that broke my heart.

At Port Authority I made my way through the underground maze to the subway. Looking at a large digital clock near the Hudson News newsstand, I could see it was 11:28 AM. I hopped on an express train that took me to Seventy-second Street in one quick jolt. Once above ground I headed north through Verdi Square, walking up Amsterdam. It felt strange to be in the neighborhood so early in the morning on a Saturday. I now associated this stretch of streets with Dr. Schwartz, since the only time I was ever here was when I was either going to or coming from seeing him. But instead of walking another block to Seventy-fourth Street, I turned down Seventy-third, heading for Jeff's apartment in the brownstone.

As I walked down the street, I spotted the doorman from the Wakefield standing on the sidewalk talking to the mailman. Our eyes met and he nodded. I quickly looked away, jumping up the steps of the brownstone two at a time. The lock didn't give me any trouble and in just a few seconds I was inside. I turned around and peered through the glass of the brownstone's outer doors. Across the street, the doorman looked very confused.

When I entered Jeff's apartment, I was hit with a very strong sense of *déjà vu*. It felt incredibly familiar, and yet I'd never been there. As I walked through the rooms, I couldn't get over how strange and yet not-strange it felt.

This was all my stuff. These were all things that I currently owned and had back in Montclair. Well, half of it was. In the living room was the entertainment system that I had

bought when Grainne and I first moved to Hoboken. Some of the furniture in the bedroom were pieces that I'd also bought back when we moved from New York to New Jersey (we'd practically doubled our square footage by leaving Manhattan, and needed lots of furniture to help fill the space). But some things I didn't recognize. The bed and couch I'd never seen before. They seemed new, same with a table and chairs that sat between the small living room and the tiny kitchen. Looking over the bookshelves, I recognized all of the titles. Same with the CDs. Beside the bed there was a stack of books that didn't match anything I had at home in Montclair, but they were all titles that I knew about. I'd read about them in the *Times*, or in *The New Yorker*, and had meant to buy them. But in the past year, due to Zachery, I hadn't read much. For a second I was jealous of this other Jeff; he probably had time for everything.

I sat down on the couch, looking over the room. I figured what had happened was that, in the divorce, Jeff had taken the furniture from the extra room and the entertainment center and TV and stereo equipment from the living room, and that was it. The couch had been Grainne's—she owned it when we first met in 2003—and even though we'd bought the bed together, Jeff must have let Grainne keep it.

It was a nice apartment, I had to admit. And it was scary because it's just what I would have chosen if I had to go out and look for a new place. Brownstone, Manhattan, Upper West Side. Perfect. That shouldn't have surprised me, but it did.

Getting up, I looked through the window and saw the doorman still standing on the sidewalk with the mailman. Neither of them seemed in a hurry. Their voices were loud and I could hear them, muffled through the glass. I then noticed the room across the street, the studio apartment in the Wakefield, the one I had briefly visited last week. I could see, perched on the windowsill, the opera glasses sitting atop a book.

It was just a few days ago that I'd seen yet another Jeff Gomez killed, hit by a car on the corner near my office. And it was just two weeks before that I met those other versions of myself. It felt like almost too much to take. Plus, with Grainne having been gone, I was out of sorts and mixed up. It was all combining into a feeling of confusion and lethargy. I went into Jeff's room, feeling like Goldilocks, and collapsed onto his bed for a nap.

I woke up a few hours later. Sunlight was streaming in through the open window. It took me a few seconds to realize where I was. At first I thought it was a dream and tried to shake it off. But then it all came back to me. I shrugged and got up, stretched and—on my way to the bathroom—saw a pair of running shoes on the floor. It had been chilly earlier, but it wasn't really cold. With a long-sleeve shirt, I'd be okay. I decided to go for a run.

I rummaged around in Jeff's drawers, quickly finding some running shorts, socks, and a heather gray long-sleeve T-shirt. I got dressed, took a swig of water, and headed downstairs.

Across the street the doorman was nowhere to be seen, so I scrambled down the steps. Halfway down the block I forgot about the Wakefield and the doorman and the brownstone. I slipped into my old routine from when I lived in Manhattan years ago. I stopped to stretch a few times, using the first step of a townhouse to loosen my hamstrings. As I walked I could see, through the traffic a block away going by in both directions, the trees of Central Park swaying in the cool breeze. I turned my head in circles and swung my arms from side to side. At the end of Seventy-third Street I saw someone trying to parallel park an SUV. Across the street, another car was trying to do the same exact thing.

I did more stretches against a curb not far from the Bethesda Fountain and just a few yards from where a jazz trio was playing. After a few minutes of stretching, I felt loosened up and started running, heading south in a counterclockwise loop.

It had been a long time since I'd jogged anywhere, let alone Central Park. It took my body a little while to get used to the sensation. At first my legs felt heavy, and the muscles were flabby and out of shape. It wasn't until I reached the southwest corner of the park, near Columbus Circle, that I found my stride.

By the time I was halfway through the loop I was totally back in the old routine. Everything was coming back to me: which landmarks stood for what measurement, and how fast I had to be going in order to get a respectable time. I sank so deep into my old routine that, for a few minutes, I forgot who I was. Zachery seemed like an illusion, Grainne felt very far away. At first, being in Jeff's apartment had felt like a business trip. I was simply passing through and would one day return to my former life. But it was beginning to feel different. I wondered, *If I stayed here, would I turn into that other Jeff? How easy would it be to forget?*

I finished the run, covered in sweat and aching but otherwise fine. Tomorrow morning my legs would no doubt be sore, but at that moment they actually felt lighter than when I began. My watch was still flashing twelve o'clock so I didn't know my time for running the lap, but I knew that I was rusty and that it had taken longer than it used to.

When I got back to the apartment, I poured myself a glass of water, took off the soggy T-shirt, and sat on one of chairs tucked into the small table sandwiched between the living room and kitchen. I turned on the TV and found a Yankees game. They were playing Tampa Bay and were losing. As I drank the water and sat in Jeff's running shorts, with a T-shirt around my neck and the cool air on my chest from the open window, I thought back to my life before Grainne. This was exactly how it used to be. On Saturday I'd start watching a

Yankees game, go out for a run, and come back to see how they were doing. If they were winning I kept watching and if they were losing I watched something else. I'd spent years that way, living that life. And I think I was happy. But that was almost a decade ago. I'd grown since then, but this Jeff had shrunk.

Once the game was over I turned off the TV, drank the last of the water, and then placed the glass on the table. For a few minutes I just sat there. There was silence in the room. Silence like I hadn't heard in years. No wife asking me to do chores, no baby needing changing or a bath. No nothing. I finally got up, took off the shorts, shoes, socks, and climbed into the shower.

In the dresser—identical to one I had in a room of our house in Montclair—I found a pair of jeans I didn't recognize. They were expensive-looking Levi's, the kind that—for no apparent reason—cost \$200. I also fished out of the drawer an Izod polo, put it on, and headed back into the living room.

I turned on the stereo, hitting *shuffle* on the iPod that was hooked up to it. I went into the kitchen and found my favorite brand of beer in the fridge. I cracked it open, pouring it slowly—and at an angle—into a fluted glass, and then went back into the living room.

I sat down at Jeff's desk in the corner, flipping up the lid to his silver laptop (the same model I had in the study in Montclair). I was prompted for a password but knew it. After the machine whirred back to life, I could see that there were a number of windows and documents already open. One file seemed to be the PowerPoint report that I'd also been working on, the competitive website analysis. I glanced through the slides, seeing if this Jeff had come up with anything I'd missed. He hadn't, but a few things were worded differently and some of the slides were in a different order.



There was also a Word document open that said at the top, *Notes for a new introduction to the paperback edition of Print is Dead*. But this was nothing more than a list of topics and subjects Jeff wanted to cover in the essay. Many of the words were misspelled, with crinkly red lines underneath them. I didn't see any trace of the essay itself. It seemed to be very much the initial brainstorming session. This made me grin because I'd already made substantial progress on my version of the essay. *Slacker*, I thought.

His email program was also open, in addition to a Web browser; a number of windows automatically updated. In one of the windows, the home page of *The New York Times* refreshed itself. Other windows held Pitchfork, The Huffington Post, and Salon. One of the windows had a series of faces in it, women's faces. It was the dating website, Match. I could believe this. It's the way I'd met Grainne all those years ago. Always shy, and never one to approach a woman in a bar, Internet dating seemed like the way to go.

As I looked over the faces, I noticed that their ages all seemed to be between 32-34. I guessed that Jeff was hoping to meet someone young so that he could completely start over. Get married and have a family. *Now he wants to have a child*, I thought. *Too bad he didn't want that before.*

For a few minutes—four songs and half a beer—I scrolled through the various pages on Match, clicking on the occasional profile and imagining what it would be like to be single again. To me these were just pictures, but for Jeff they were possibilities. This made me both sad and jealous. Sad because Jeff had to start again from scratch. Jealous because Jeff was able to start again from scratch.

*It's probably what I would do if my marriage fell apart. Hell, I bet that Grainne's probably also...*

If this Jeff was single, having divorced Grainne and jumped back into the dating scene, then it stood to reason that there was another version of Grainne out there, newly single and doing the exact same thing.

I clicked on *Start New Search*, customizing it so I would only see thirty-nine year-old divorced women who lived in the New York area. There were 148 women who matched my criteria. On the third page, I saw her. At first I almost clicked onto another page without noticing. Her face was too familiar for me to recognize. I saw it everyday, so seeing it on the laptop didn't ring any bells. Feeling a little bit queasy, I clicked on her profile.

Her screen name was Ginnie1970. I couldn't remember what her screen name had been all those years ago when we first met, but I don't think it had been that. I didn't recognize her profile photo. It must have been new. In the picture she was all glammed up, wearing a black dress and makeup. Her hair also looked like it'd been recently styled. She looked gorgeous, not to mention much thinner (the fact that she hadn't recently had a child of course helped). Under the heading *About me and who I'm looking for*, Grainne had written the usual kind of thing. She loved long walks on the beach, to ski, to travel. She was looking for a man who "knows who he is" and "knows how to treat a lady." The books she listed as having "just read" were books that I'd seen various women reading on trains and subways.

In addition to her main photo, she'd uploaded a number of candid shots. I could see thumbnails of them on the left of the screen. Half of them were from before she met me; Grainne posing at exotic locales around the world. *Here's me in front of the Sphinx. Here's me in front of the Eiffel Tower.* There were also a few photos of Grainne that I had taken. Lounging on the green grass in Central Park when we lived on Seventy-seventh Street just a few blocks from where I was right now. A shot of her on the rooftop balcony of my dad's apartment in San Francisco, Grainne looking beautiful in a lavender dress, Coit Tower visible in the

background. Her other photos had had me in them at one point, but I had since been clumsily removed. In a few of them you could see the sleeve of my blazer or even my arm behind her neck. In each of these photos Grainne looked happy. I was the one who was creating that happiness, at least to some degree. That smile was caused by me. I took a sip of the beer and thought, *Or who knows? Maybe I had nothing to do with anything.* I thought back to that line I'd written a few weeks ago: *I was a teenager when I first discovered the word solipsism.*

I clicked back to the main page of her profile and just stared at it with tears in my eyes. This is what men all around the city could be looking at. My wife was available again. The potential nightmare you live with when you're married—that someone else will sleep with your spouse—could come true in a click. *And yet,* I had to tell myself, *this wasn't my wife.* She was Jeff's ex-wife. And if he had seen fit to leave her, then she had the right to do whatever she wanted.

Above her photo in red it said *Online now!* I took another sip of the beer and was about to click an icon on the right side of the page that said *Email her* when the phone rang. At first I wasn't going to answer it, but then I thought maybe it was one of the other Jeffs. Maybe the one who was going to Montclair had got lost, or maybe he had found the house all right but something was wrong with Grainne or Zachery. I picked up the phone, expecting the next voice to be my own.

"Jeff?"

It was a female.

"Uh—yes." I felt like a fraud. The answer was technically correct, but I don't think I was the Jeff she was looking for.

"Can I," she began, but then stopped. She seemed upset. Her voice was shaking (it was possible she *always* sounded like that, but I doubted it). "Can I...come over?"

“Oh, uh—”

“I know we didn’t have plans tonight but...something happened and...I just really want to see you.”

It was a yes or no question, but—not knowing who this person was—I didn’t know what either answer could entail. Not wanting to screw anything up for Jeff, I said slowly, “Sure.”

“Great, thanks.” She already sounded better. “I really appreciate it. Say, an hour?”

“Sure,” I said, and then repeated. “An hour.”

“See you soon.”

“Okay, but wait.” I felt I had to ask. “Who is this?”

She laughed, I guess thinking the question was a joke.

“It’s Leah, silly.”

I spent the next hour cleaning up the apartment, although I wasn’t sure why. What if she was just a co-worker checking up on a project, or a friend of a friend who had to return an item borrowed from Jeff, like a book or a CD? If that were the case, I’d feel like a fool for straightening up the living room, doing the dishes, and picking up the dirty clothes from the floor. As the songs from Jeff’s iPod blared through the apartment as I was cleaning, it made me think of years ago when I would get ready for dates on a Saturday night.

As I was looking underneath the kitchen sink for some Windex, I found a bag of groceries in a brown paper sack. Inside the bag was a clove of garlic, a small bottle of vinegar, four black votive candles, two larger black candles, one red votive candle, and an assortment of porcelain cups and saucers (four of each). There was also a metal bowl about

the size of a fist; it smelled sweetly of incense and had numerous burn marks. Tucked into one of the cups was a piece of paper that I pulled out and unfolded. At the top of the paper was a strange looking seal. It looked like a pair of wings floating above a whirlpool, surrounded on three sides with smaller whirlpools. Around the edge were four words written in an alphabet I couldn't recognize let alone read. The words looked sort of Cyrillic or Arabic and yet were neither. At the bottom of the page the following was printed in an ornate script:

*To the south, west, north and east*

*By all my magic do I release*

*That which my will once did yearn,*

*What I created here I now return*

Just as I was going to pull out the items and set them on the counter, trying to get a sense of whether there was any connection between the candles, dishes, and the piece of paper, the buzzer rang. When it did, I jumped. The paper in my hand fell to the floor. The buzzer rang again. I pressed *Talk* on the intercom and said, "Hello?" I then pressed *Listen*. A scratchy voice came through the small speaker. "Jeff, hey, it's Leah. Let me up?" Pressing the *Door* button, I could faintly hear the *bzzzzt* of the lock three flights down.

I turned to the apartment and gave it a quick look. Everything seemed fine. The iPod was playing a soft song and outside the sun was setting. Seventy-third Street was enveloped in pink shadows. I could see, briefly, through to the apartment across the street, the fourth floor studio in the Wakefield where the other Jeff had been bivouacked for the past two weeks. In the hallway I heard the echo of what I assumed was a woman's high heels against

the wooden staircase, but across the street I thought I saw something else: the image of a man who looked like me, an echo of myself. The head of the silhouette seemed to be moving, nodding as if in approval.

The noises from the hallway were getting louder. Whoever she was, she was going to be at Jeff's door in a matter of seconds. The sounds then abruptly stopped. Through the door I could smell perfume. The doorbell rang, but then a voice said in a comical tone, "*Knock knock.*"

In my nervousness, I wrung my hands together. When I did this, I felt my wedding ring dig into my flesh. *Shit. Jeff isn't married.* As fast as I could, I pulled the ring from my left hand and tossed it onto the dresser. It made a slight metallic *clink* as it landed.

I opened the door and saw a young, attractive woman standing in the hallway. When the girl came in, I didn't know how to look at her. Who was she? More importantly, who was she to Jeff? She was nicely dressed, wearing brown open-toed high heel shoes, skinny blue jeans, and a floral printed tunic under a lime-green cashmere cardigan that had jade-colored buttons at the wrists. She was trying to impress someone, but who? I couldn't be sure the clothes she was wearing were for me. Maybe she had a boyfriend and I was merely a confidant. She was there to tell me all about *him*. But something—and I swear it wasn't vanity (at least I don't think it was)—told me that that wasn't the case. This wasn't a disinterested co-worker here to tell me about her troubles. This wasn't a neighbor looking to borrow a cup of sugar or a corkscrew or a book. She was here for me, to see me, to fuck me. I gulped.

"Hey," she said, giving me nothing to go on.

"Hey," I said back.

For a second we circled each other like teenagers in a fight where neither wants to throw the first punch. Finally she leaned in and kissed me on the lips. In my mind I definitively crossed a few entries off the list of who she might be: neighbor, co-worker, friend-of-a-friend. I must have looked strange as she leaned back from the kiss because she asked, “Jeff, are you all right?”

I could still feel her lips on mine. They were wet and catching the breeze. They almost stung. Had I done something wrong? Grainne, I felt, was in another world. But somehow this would ripple back to her and she’d know.

“Yeah, fine—fine,” I said, a bit too fast. I tried not to get flustered but, all of the sudden, it felt very hot in the room. “So, uh, how *are* you?”

She entered the living room and sat down on the couch, tossing a huge purple handbag to the floor as she did so.

“I’m fine except I’m pissed at Cassandra and Blake for bailing on me tonight. We were supposed to go to a party in the Village but *both* think they’re coming down with something. I mean, how *convenient* right?”

I just stood there. None of these names sounded familiar. All I could do was nod.

“They both had a flu shot this week, so they’re blaming it on that. But I think it’s just bullshit.”

“Yeah, bullshit,” I said, mechanically.

Then she looked at me and grinned.

“So that’s when I thought I’d call you. I hope you don’t mind. I know how much you like your *privacy*.” The way she said the word conveyed that either I actually didn’t enjoy my privacy or else I enjoyed it too much. Knowing who I used to be, I figured it was the latter and not the former.

“No, it’s not—it’s not a problem at all.”

She smiled and said, “Good, I’m glad. So, can I get a drink?”

“Yeah—yeah, sure.” I was happy to be given a task to do. “What would you like?”

“The usual,” she said. Thankfully, a second later she followed up with, “Vodka and tonic.”

I retreated into the kitchen to make the drinks. I didn’t know where anything was, but it was a small kitchen—with only a few cabinets and drawers—so it didn’t take long to find everything. I even discovered a couple of limes in the fridge and so, in a couple of minutes, I had two drinks. I carried them out to the living room and handed one to...what was her name again? Oh yeah, *Leah*.

“Here you go,” I said.

She took the drink and then raised it to her lips for a sip.

“Thanks,” she said, following this quickly with, “cheers.”

I sat down next to her, which felt odd.

We sipped our drinks in silence, the only noise being the traffic on Seventy-third Street and The Knife coming out of the stereo speakers. *The moment we believe that we have never met. Another kind of love, it’s easy to forget.*

“So,” I said. “Cassandra and Blake.”

“Ugh,” Leah sighed after she took another sip of her drink. “Forget about *them*.”

Those names, beside her own, were all that I knew about her so I was hesitant to give them up as a topic of conversation. In the silence that followed I took a deep sip of my own drink. I hadn’t mixed it well and swallowed almost nothing but vodka.

“How’s work?” she finally asked. “Did you have a good week?”



This was a relief since Jeff and I had the same job, so anything that I described would presumably be something she knew about. I told her about some of the projects I was working on and my co-workers and boss. Throughout it all she nodded and seemed interested. After half an hour, we both needed a refill on our drinks.

I was in the kitchen pouring the Ketel One when I finally made the connection. The Facebook updates. *Leah*. The name that got me into trouble last week with Grainne. *This is her*. She must be Jeff's girlfriend, or at least a girl that he was seeing. *But why hadn't he mentioned her?* I guessed since they hadn't had plans for tonight, it hadn't seemed important. I wasn't supposed to have met her, so Jeff didn't feel the need to bring it up.

I finished pouring the vodka and put it back in the freezer. Then I fished out the tonic water from the fridge. As I was mixing the drinks, I felt that there was something else. I'd had a nagging feeling about Leah since she entered the apartment a little less than an hour ago. I felt like I knew her the second I saw her, but had chalked that up to the fact that Jeff knew her and that, therefore, so did I on some instinctual level.

The guy from *You're Familiar*, Luther Blissett, had talked about one of the theories being that every conceivable world was merely laid on top of the other. The minor differences between them blended together. Because of this, some of Jeff's knowledge of this girl had seeped through to me. But I began to sense that it was even deeper than that. Then it hit me. I had met Leah before, nearly a decade ago. I met her before the split occurred, the three Jeffs going in their separate directions. The memory I had of her from so long ago was mine.

It had been at a party for the website *Slate*, held at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park. She was a publicist at Holt back then and I was just getting started in publishing, working as an assistant at St. Martin's Press. It was January and cold out. It must

have been 1999, back when the Internet bubble was at its biggest. I didn't know many people at the party and so was grateful when a mutual friend introduced me to Leah. I had a crush on her from the second we met and followed her around for most of the night. As the party began clearing out around ten, I got her email address as we stood in a long line to get our coats. She left with some co-workers and I headed downtown to meet a friend at Chumley's. When I got there, I found my friend with a bunch of his friends from out of town in a booth in the sort of back room, taking up an entire wall. I had a number of beers and was excited about Leah.

I followed up with her the next week; she never got back to me. I emailed her a few more times before finally giving up. Years went by, I dated other people, and then I met Grainne. We got married, had a kid, and moved to Montclair. At least, that's what happened to me. In this world, Jeff's marriage didn't work out and he found himself suddenly single. A few months after moving to Manhattan he probably ran into Leah as haphazardly as he had the first time, their orbits overlapping every nine or ten years. It hadn't been a success that first time, but they were different people then. Who knows what had changed in her world between 1999 and 2009? But whatever it was, it made her give Jeff another chance.

I entered the living room and gave Leah her drink.

"Thanks," she said, pulling a pack of cigarettes out of the giant purple bag. "Want one?"

I used to smoke but had to give it up when Grainne had Zachery. I was never a heavy smoker, so it wasn't too big of a deal. From time to time I missed it, but otherwise it wasn't an issue.

"Oh, sure," I said. As she lit it for me, which I thought was pretty sexy, I noticed the various ashtrays placed around the room. I hadn't noticed them before now. The air in the

apartment also held a stale smell of cigarette smoke, but I'd attributed that to a neighbor or the street. All of Manhattan, at times, smells like an ashtray.

The first puff of smoke felt heavy and alien in my lungs. I had to stifle a cough, my body wanting to immediately expel what I'd just inhaled. But by the fourth puff I was enjoying the taste and the experience of smoking again. I didn't draw the breaths as deeply into my lungs as I used to, but I was indeed inhaling. In no time the smoke from our two cigarettes filled the room.

"Let's go out." Leah said this quickly, as if the idea had just come to her.

I tried to match her with a fast reaction of my own, but stalled. All I could muster was, "What?"

"I'm bored. Let's go *out*."

"But where?" I said.

She rolled her eyes and responded, "Anywhere."

I took a sip of my drink and then a puff from the cigarette. I remembered this feeling. Saturday night; early. Anything could happen. The feeling tingled inside of me even though it'd been years since I felt it. The cigarettes and the vodka had also given me a light buzz.

"Sure," I said, feeling a rush as the word exited my mouth.

We stepped down the stairs of the brownstone, Leah with her left arm curled around my right arm. A cold breeze blew through the trees along Seventy-third Street; I was glad I'd borrowed a cotton scarf and blazer from Jeff's closet. It felt like fall had arrived, and it was

hard to imagine that just a couple of hours ago it had been sunny and I'd gone for a run in the park. We stopped at the sidewalk and I pointed east and west.

“Columbus or Amsterdam?” I asked.

“Your choice,” she said.

I decided on Columbus and started walking in that direction.

We passed a couple of bars that seemed filled with either frat boys or bankers (neither of us could agree on which was more annoying), and finally we ran across a wine bar on the corner of Seventy-eighth Street. It was a long, dark space and it seemed perfect. Leah and I found a table near the back; we hoisted ourselves onto red velvet-covered barstools. When we finally got the attention of the waitress, I ordered a bottle of Vernaccia and felt momentarily guilty since I only knew of that wine since it was one of Grainne's favorites. After a glass of wine we ordered some food—pasta for me, just a salad for Leah—and as we ate the bar continued to fill up. A few of the frat boys and bankers who couldn't get into Prohibition or Jackson Hole up the street joined us, but we didn't let that ruin our little oasis. The food was good and so was the music; in between Italian disco I picked out “What a Fool Believes” and “I Can't Go For That.” A few times Leah and I slipped out to the sidewalk to smoke a cigarette, catching the eye of the waitress to let her know we weren't trying to slip out on the check. By the fifth cigarette of the night, and the fourth drink, it had all come back to me who to be.

On the sidewalk, as we flung our burned-out cigarettes into the street, people all around us were getting into cabs. Leaving this bar for another bar, or taking a taxi from the Upper West Side to any one of Manhattan's numerous neighborhoods. I could see above the bar windows that were lit up, apartments on the other side. The windows were open, drapes blowing in the cool breeze of the autumn everyone had been dying for. Noise was

everywhere. I smiled at Leah and she smiled at me. I'd missed this energy. In Montclair you have peace and quiet, but you don't have this.

We went back in and found our seats. From a huge clock over the bar I could see that it was nearly midnight. Not terribly late, but Grainne and I were always in bed at ten, worn out from another day of running after and caring for Zachery. And yet, as I looked around the bar, no one seemed tired. The bar kept filling up instead of thinning out. I wondered, *Who are these people?*

After drinking the last of the wine, we ordered dessert and glasses of tawny port to go along with it. While we were finishing off the tiramisu, Leah telling me about a problem at her office (she still worked in publishing, but for a different company; we knew lots of the same people), I thought back to that first night we met, back in 1999. I couldn't help but think what my life would have been like if Leah had returned those emails I wrote to her a week after the party. Would she and I have gotten together and, if so, would we have stayed together? Since she's dating Jeff there must be some kind of chemistry between us. But did that mean there had been chemistry a decade ago, and we just didn't explore it? Or did our chemistry need the ensuing ten years to ripen and ferment?

It was crazy to think how different everything would have been if, instead of dating now, we'd dated then. We could have moved in with each other in 2000, held each other as the towers came down on 9/11 a year later. By 2002 we'd be having our first child and, in 2003—when I was just meeting Grainne—Leah and I would be celebrating the one-year birthday of our first child. Maybe it would have been a girl; maybe we would have named her after my maternal grandmother: June. It was useless to try and guess or determine which life was better. They were each what they were. If I believed that load of crap that Luther had told me last week at the bar, there was in fact a world out there where Leah and I had gotten

together and were still together now. I closed my eyes and tried to feel it. But all I felt was drunk.

We finished the last of our port and by then the bar was loud and crowded. I paid the bill and we walked back to the brownstone, somewhat wobbly after all the wine and drinks beforehand. When we got to the steps I sort of paused, thinking that she was going to go her way and I was going to go mine. But she took my stopping to mean that I was a gentleman, that I was letting her walk up the steps to the brownstone first. She leapt up the stairs and then waited for me at the top. I walked up the steps slowly, opening the door just as slowly. Leah entered the building and then headed up the stairs to the third floor. I guessed that it was a given she was going to spend the night.

We got inside the apartment. Leah slipped into the bathroom and I froze, standing in the middle of the living room. Again, out of instinct—the same way that I’d earlier joined my glass to Leah’s for a toast even though I wasn’t sure what it was exactly that was being toasted—I turned on the iPod. I then lit some candles and lit a cigarette from a pack sitting beside one of the ashtrays. When Leah came out of the bathroom, I got up since I also had to use it. As I passed her near the kitchen, she stopped and pulled me against her.

I didn’t know how to hold her. She was taller than Grainne and for years—approaching a decade—my lips and arms and body had been joined only to Grainne’s lips and arms and body. When we were together, we didn’t just embrace; we interlocked, like two puzzle pieces. It was a cliché metaphor except it wasn’t a metaphor. So when Leah came in for a kiss, I responded by tilting my head at a certain angle based on Grainne’s height and my years of training. Leah, being taller, threw everything off. Instead of kissing her lips, at first I kissed her chin.

“Sorry,” I said, after. “My timing was off.”

She laughed and said, “That’s all right. I’ve been known to be off with my timing, too.”

I wondered if that was a reference to years before, when we met but never went anywhere. Had she been thinking the same things that I was, thinking *What if?* and trying to figure out what the previous decade would have been like if only she’d written back to me? If only she’d given us a chance?

“So then,” she said, “try again.”

I leaned in again, forcing my body to forget about Grainne. It worked. I met Leah’s mouth with my own and, after a few seconds, her lips separated and I felt her tongue. Her arms moved across my back so I did the same thing. Under her shirt I could feel her bra. When the kiss was over, Leah said, “Better.”

She returned to the couch and after I came out of the bathroom I mixed two more drinks. We talked for another hour until finally, just as the candles were dying, Leah said, “Come on, let’s go to bed.”

She led me to the bedroom. I watched her undress, feeling guilty as she slipped out of her jeans and left them in a heap on the floor. She peeled back the sheets and climbed in. I did the same, undressing as fast as I could. She crawled over to my side of the bed and put her arm around my chest. Neither of us made a move to have sex. I was curious, but grateful. After listening to the traffic on Seventy-third Street for ten minutes—the cars going by sounding almost like waves—I couldn’t keep my eyes open any longer.

As I was drifting away, I noticed Leah get out of bed. She left the bedroom and I saw a light go on in the hallway. At first I thought maybe she was slipping out, leaving me to wake up in the morning by myself. But then I thought something else.

*She’s going to put in her diaphragm. Or else get some condoms.*

She came back a minute later with the brown paper bag I'd found in the kitchen earlier in the day. She placed it on the dresser and fished out of it the candles and the metal bowl. After doing this, she paused. She'd noticed something on the dresser. She picked it up and examined it; my wedding ring in her hand caught the moonlight coming in from Seventy-third Street. She returned the ring to the dresser and then lit the candles, as well as the incense. She placed the candles around the room, including on the floor and the windowsill. The metal bowl she put in the center of the dresser. *Setting the mood*, I thought. But she didn't crawl back in bed; something about her demeanor suggested sinister rather than sexy. Instead she crouched on the floor, producing the piece of paper that I had read after my run. Her face looked strange in the flickering candlelight, and I got a chill. She began to rhythmically recite the words from the paper, almost chanting. Leah said, "By the lady—may moonlight join with flame, and undo by magic all that I made."

"What?" I asked, barely awake.

"Nothing," she whispered, turning and leaning in to kiss me softly on the lips. "Go to sleep."



I WALKED AWAY from the Malibu diner, sandwiched between one Jeff ahead of me and another trailing behind. The Jeff in front, as he reached the edge of the Malibu's parking lot, jogged across the street and began to head for a bus stop farther down Fourteenth Street. The other Jeff—my keys in his pocket—turned and crossed Park Avenue, silhouetted by a brand new apartment building. It used to be a factory but now was lofts. As the other two men receded in opposite directions, I found Grainne's Jetta (the *other* Grainne) and hopped in. I started the car, edged my way out of the small parking lot, and merged with traffic on Fourteenth Street. As I drove away, I watched the other Jeff—standing at the bus stop with his arms crossed—get smaller and smaller until he disappeared completely. After a couple of turns, I hopped on Route 3, headed for Montclair.

In no time—in a matter of minutes, it seemed—I was in the suburbs. The congestion of the city suddenly gave way to flat expanses of land dotted only here and there with malls, factories, and apartment buildings. Manhattan shrunk in my rearview mirror.

It seemed that the only difference between this Jetta and the one I was used to was that this one had a better stereo. My Grainne had yet to upgrade to a model that allowed for the plugging in of an iPod, whereas this one had that plus—it looked like—Bluetooth. I fished out my iPod and plugged it in, managing to hit *shuffle* without getting into an accident. Looking over my shoulder to check for cars before I changed lanes, I discovered another difference between the two Jettas. This one had, in the back, a car seat. I could also see a few toys and other items littering the back seat. A rattle, a pacifier, a cloth book that looked chewed on rather than read.

Soon I was passing the small communities outside of Montclair: Nutley, and then Clifton. The road got smaller, merging from four lanes to two. I examined each off-ramp to see if it was the one I was looking for. Just in case, I eased into the slow lane. A few seconds later I got off at Valley Road.

As the road curved around, depositing me onto a two-lane street in what looked like a small town, I saw a big banner hung on a building that said YOUR NEW LIFESTYLE STARTS HERE. At a stoplight I grabbed Jeff's directions and for the next ten minutes wound my way through upper Montclair, looking for his house. I finally turned onto Bond Street, and then drove down it as slowly as possible, looking for the address I'd been given an hour before at the Malibu diner.

It was a nice street, a quiet street, a street I could barely believe I had anything to do with. There were nothing but houses, each one with a bright green lawn, a few bushes, a walkway, a car parked in the driveway. Some even had white picket fences. When I'd lived in Manhattan my block had held a pizzeria, dry cleaner, newsstand, and two restaurants. Even in Hoboken our block held brownstones, houses, duplexes, and apartment buildings. But

here, in Montclair, variety had been reduced to a minimum. If you liked houses you would be happy, because that's all there seemed to be.

I found the address. It was a pleasant house, if a bit like all the others. I didn't know enough about architecture to know if it was a Victorian or a Colonial or what. I only knew enough to know what it wasn't: Tudor, ranch, a mansion. On either side of the house were empty driveways of black asphalt. I wasn't sure which driveway went with what house. I wasn't sure if driveways were the same as place settings and you worked your way from left to right, or whether it was the opposite. At any rate, I rolled a pair of dice in my head, picked the driveway on the left, and pulled in. I killed the engine and suddenly felt very nervous. Could I really go through with this? If I decided I couldn't, I'd have to go to a hotel since another Jeff was on his way to my apartment in Hoboken.

After taking a couple of deep breaths, I got out of the Jetta, pressed the button on the keyring to lock it (which caused the horn to give a short honk), and then walked up the driveway to the sidewalk that ran the length of the street.

The house had a nice front yard and a porch that held a swing that I knew this Grainne loved. I slowly approached the front door, feeling a bit like a burglar. The door was painted red, with a big square of glass at the top about the size of a chessboard. Behind the glass was a lace curtain through which I could see a living room and, beyond that, a dining room. I thought about ringing the doorbell but then said to myself, *You live here, you idiot*. I pulled Jeff's keys from my pocket and let myself in.

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The door stuck after I entered the house, and I had to shove to get it closed. From somewhere a voice called out, “Jeff, is that you?” It was Grainne’s voice. It seemed like a trick question but I answered, honestly, “Yes.” She then shouted out, “I’m in the kitchen, sweetie. Come on back.” I didn’t know where the kitchen was, but the house wasn’t so large that I didn’t think I couldn’t find her without asking for directions.

To the left of the front door was a staircase, uncarpeted, at the top of which I could see only a hallway. All along the wall leading to the second floor were photos of Zachery, beginning with him newly born at the bottom and progressing with him getting older every foot or so. I was in a number of the photos. Carrying Zachery out of the hospital, his skin cracked and his eyes just slits. Holding Zachery in the backyard under the shade of a cherry tree. Feeding Zachery a cupcake on what must have been his first birthday.

To the right of the entrance was a living room that had a fireplace as well as furniture that was also in my apartment back in Hoboken. On the mantel were vintage hardback books, the kind that come with a strip of satin sewn into the binding to use as a bookmark. A few coffee table books I didn’t recognize sat on a coffee table I’d never seen before, but other than that the room was exactly the same as the apartment on Hudson Street. Beyond the living room was a set of French doors that opened into a small room wedged into the corner of the house that overlooked—through one window each—the driveway and the lawn. In this room I could see a desk, a bunch of books, piles of paper, a laptop computer.

I began to walk slowly toward the back of the house. Just past the living room was the dining room; it was also filled with things I recognized. Grainne’s table and chairs we inherited from her parents, the glass case filled with her perfume bottles, the rows and rows of cookbooks (which we only rarely used). The floors throughout the house were hardwood and looked original; they creaked when I walked.

As I approached the kitchen, I heard rhythmic chopping and a radio dispensing news. Probably NPR, which Grainne liked to listen to while she did chores on Saturday mornings. I heard a stately voice say, “Support for National Public Radio comes from Corwood Industries.” After this world music, tribal and beat-heavy, filled the house. The music helped to make my heart beat even faster.

“You’re back,” Grainne said when I appeared in the doorway. She came over, kissed me on the cheek, and then went back to the counter where she was dicing walnuts with a mezzaluna. The counter also held a can of pineapple, a box of brown sugar, a small jar of apple butter, and a peeled carrot. *She’s making muffins.* Grainne used to, every month, make and then freeze a big batch of her morning glory muffins. I took one to work every day as my breakfast. They were delicious and saved me from the temptation of donuts or bagels.

“Your hair’s so long,” I said. It was the first thing that came into my mind.

“What, since visiting Heather?” she said, surprised.

I remembered her friend Heather; she’d come to town the weekend I first went to the Wakefield.

“No, sweetie, it couldn’t have grown that much. Not in a week.” She then ran her hands through hair that was at least three inches longer from when I woke up beside her this morning. “Maybe it’s just styled different?”

I didn’t say anything else. I tried not to make an issue of the fact that this Grainne had longer hair than my Grainne, but it felt strange. She ignored me and continued chopping the walnuts. My heart was still beating fast, and I needed a glass of water but didn’t know where the glasses were. On the radio, the world music was replaced by fast jazz.

“Sweetie,” Grainne said, looking out the window, “why did you park in the neighbor’s driveway?”

“What?” I answered, although I knew exactly what she meant.

Still looking out the window and seeing her Jetta, Grainne said, “That’s not our driveway.”

“Well, I thought I’d just run in and see if you and...Zachery wanted anything for breakfast.” I’d paused before saying Zachery’s name, not sure how we referred to him: the baby, our son, the Zachster.

“But you saw us have breakfast this morning before you left. You had a cup of coffee and helped feed him. Jeff, what’s *wrong* with you?”

She stepped toward me and made a move to put her hand on my forehead. I pulled away from her and said, “I’m fine. Really.” She went back to the counter and finished up with the walnuts. Moving to a pantry, she took out a box of raisins.

“How was breakfast?” she asked.

“It was good.”

“Was the Tick Tock crowded?”

*The Tick Tock?* I kicked myself for not having rehearsed more with Jeff. I just played along.

“Not too bad. It was early.”

“Yes,” Grainne said, and then repeated, somewhat dreamily, “early.”

In the ensuing silence I looked down at my watch; it was flashing twelve o’clock. Somewhere, I heard a child making noise.

“Where’s...” I could barely say his name. “Zachery?”

“In the mud room. Grandma Gomez sent him a new set of blocks and he’s been playing with them all morning.”

“Grandma Gomez? My grandmother’s dead,” I said.

“*Your* mother, Jeff. *Zachery’s* grandmother.” When I didn’t react, she added, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

I twisted my face, trying to act like I was making a joke. Grainne softened and didn’t seem suspicious. The radio then began to play Celtic music; it was all bagpipes and flutes. To the right of the kitchen was a doorway that led into a room that had been painted a deep green. I approached it slowly, the sounds of a cooing and gurgling child getting louder with each step. Behind me, Grainne tried to hum along to the radio. She couldn’t choose between humming to the bagpipes or the flute, so her improvised melody skated between both.

I turned the corner and saw that the room was actually a covered porch. The back of the house—bricks painted the same green—formed one wall of the room, while the other three were wood and looked like the walls of a cabin. The windows overlooked a large backyard and a garden. Along one wall was a bench and along another were two bikes. In the corner were a number of shoes: winter boots, flip-flops, sneakers. Sitting on a rug that was covered with a pattern of train tracks was a small child wearing a powder-blue onesie.

He had his back to me and I could see that his head was covered in swirling, wispy black hair. His light-brown legs were pudgy and stuck out of white diapers that barely seemed to fit inside his blue jumper. He was playing with a set of blocks and humming to himself as he did so. This humming, combined with Grainne’s wafting in from the other room, enveloped me in stereo.

I watched as his pudgy hands—at the tips of which were fingernails that were no bigger than pebbles—deliberately put one block on top of the other. The blocks each contained a letter burned into all four sides. I could see that there were seven blocks, with letters that spelled out Zachery’s name. Not that that’s what they were currently spelling out. Instead, oblivious even to what letters were, he had stacked them in the order of ZCHYRE,

with the A sitting somewhat out of his reach. I slowly approached and sat down next to him, pulling the errant block back into his orbit. When I did this he turned, saw my face, and said loudly, “Dada!” A chill went through me. Zachery repeated the word, and the chill came yet again. He then leaned over and gave me a quick but powerful hug. I felt little arms draped around my shoulders and that small, warm face pressed against my neck. I hugged him back, and he then returned to the building blocks.

I tried to help him, but he quickly pushed my hands away, saying softly, “Do byself, do byself.” So I just sat there and watched as Zachery continually built up the seven blocks, smashed them down, and then stacked them up once again. He did this eight or nine times, and never got close to spelling out his name. It was always something like CHZARYE and YCERHAZ. I looked at him as he did this, trying to see my face in his. It was hard to do since my face was so thin and he still had on him so much baby fat. My face was a rectangle, but his was a circle. Still, I could tell—somehow—that he belonged to me. That he had been created because of me. This tiny, breathing human being wouldn’t exist if I didn’t. I began to cry just as Zachery lost interest in the blocks and crawled across the room to another toy, an oversized set of plastic keys. He grabbed the keys and alternately shook them back and forth like a rattle and put them in his mouth. Every minute or so he’d crawl back to where I was and envelop me in another tight hug.

“I think somebody missed you.”

I looked up and saw Grainne standing in the doorway. I then turned to Zachery and said, “I missed him, too.”

In the kitchen a timer went off, causing Grainne to say, “Ah, the muffins.” She retreated back into the kitchen, calling out behind her, “Want to come have a fresh one?”



“Sure,” I replied. Before getting up I looked again at Zachery. Could that really be my son? Could what I’d been so mixed up and indecisive about have finally happened? While Zachery contented himself with the keys, I reached for five of his blocks and rearranged them so they spelled CRAZY.

In the kitchen, Grainne was overturning the pan of muffins. The whole room smelled wonderful and warm because of them. She then placed the muffins to cool on two silver racks. She took one of the muffins aside and sliced it in two; I could see steam escape. From the refrigerator she pulled out a tub of margarine. Zachery joined us from the other room, crawling but with the keys in his mouth. Grainne scooped out some margarine with a knife and then wiped each half of the muffin with it. On the radio an electro song came on and Zachery stopped playing with the keys long enough to jerkily dance along to the music. Grainne put the muffin on a bread plate and handed it to me along with a glass of milk. “Hope you like it,” she said.

While I ate the muffin, and Zachery played and danced, Grainne started to clean up. As I watched her move—gliding throughout the large kitchen, drying bowls and putting them away—I couldn’t get over how different she was. This Grainne was more like my Grainne used to be, back when we first got married and we were happy and it seemed the lives we’d always wanted would soon be ours. But then, over the years and after all the arguments over whether we would have a child, we’d each become hardened. Smaller, bitter, dulled. But this Grainne was none of that. Because of Zachery’s birth and the house in the suburbs and the garden in the backyard that she’d always told me—when we lived in apartments—that she wanted to have, Grainne had grown. This meant that the Jeff I was

replacing for the night was probably similarly changed. We may have looked the same, but we weren't.

As Grainne did the dishes, I noticed that the kitchen needed to be redone. The stove looked about a decade old and the paintjob was faded. The walls were probably once white, but now looked almost pale yellow. Seeing this, I began to lose myself in the fantasy of Grainne and I redoing the kitchen. We'd sit in the dining room I'd only just seen and go over a budget for a contractor and appliances, trying to agree on colors and a design. Would we choose a granite or marble countertop? How about subway tile for a backsplash? Merely thinking the word *backsplash* made me warm. Lonely, unhappy people certainly don't think of such things.

"Heather called again this morning," Grainne said, shaking me out of my thoughts. "She's still taking this really hard."

I didn't know what *this* was, so I just kept quiet.

"I know it wasn't easy for us to get Zachery, but thank god we never had to go through that."

I was still lost; *that* must be related to *this*.

She then turned to face me, her hands covered in suds. The water from the faucet hitting the bottom of the steel sink sounded like rain.

"I can't imagine," Grainne said, "what our lives would be like without him."

I answered, "I can."

She looked at me strangely until Zachery broke the moment by shaking his plastic keys so violently that they sounded like a noisemaker on New Year's Eve.

“Okay, that’s enough out of you, little man,” Grainne said. She quickly rinsed off her hands and then leaned down and scooped Zachery off the floor. “How about a nap? Would you like that? A little nappy nap?”

As she carried him out of the room, she leaned in and kissed me again. Two kisses within an hour. My Grainne and I had stopped doing that. Just as she stepped through the kitchen door she turned and, with one foot in the dining room and one in the kitchen, she said, “After this I’ll do some tidying up upstairs, so why don’t you go do some writing?”

I nodded, dumbly. Writing? Where did Jeff do that? What was he working on? For all I knew he was writing some novel about how three different versions of himself discover each other.

“Sure,” I said.

Grainne sang to Zachery as she carried him upstairs. He tried to sing along, although it all came out like either laughing or gurgling or gurgling laughter. I finished the glass of milk, set it down in the sink, and walked back to the living room. I remembered the room behind the French doors and walked into it.

It was a long room, painted light purple and running parallel to the living room. Looking around the space, I could tell from the stacks of books on the ground and the CDs and DVDs lining the bookshelves—all of which I recognized—that this was indeed my room. I sat down at the desk. The neighborhood was quiet. It was minutes between cars going by and in the spaces between them there was only the occasional jogger or kid on his bike.

On the table was a gray Graco baby monitor. I reached for it and switched it on. After it crackled to life, I heard Grainne upstairs in what I guessed was Zachery’s room. She was cooing to our son, trying to get him to take a nap.

“Go to bed,” she sang. “Go to be-e-e-ed.”

I opened the silver laptop and the computer instantly woke up, making a slight whirring sound. A Word document appeared on the screen named *speed\_of\_light\_reading.docx*. The top of the page read: *The Speed of Light Reading: A New Introduction to the Paperback Edition of Print is Dead*. This made me smile since I’d been thinking of writing a new introduction to put on my website but hadn’t yet gotten around to it. But Jeff, as I scrolled through the document and saw that he’d already written eight pages, had made some pretty good progress.

I turned the volume down on the monitor, reducing Grainne’s singing to white noise. For the next half hour I read through the introduction Jeff was working on, making minor changes and occasional additions. I wrote about half a page. At one point I stopped typing and the room—the whole house, really—felt so comfortable I never wanted to leave. A cool breeze began to blow through the window that was open slightly. A group of kids went by on skateboards, punching each other in the shoulder and boasting about what they were going to do that night.

Grainne finally came downstairs and called out to me from the living room.

“Honey,” she said, “can you come help me with some chores?”

“Sure,” I replied. “Just give me two seconds.”

I turned to the laptop, opened a new document, and wrote *You lucky bastard*. I then closed the computer and joined Jeff’s wife in the other room.

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For the next couple of hours I helped Grainne with various things around the house, cleaning the kitchen and taking laundry down to the washer and dryer that was set up in the unfinished basement. I was amazed by how big the house was. I could only imagine how many rooms were upstairs. At one point I heard honking and could see it was coming from the neighbor's driveway. I grabbed the keys to the Jetta and ran outside, backing the car out of the wrong driveway and pulling it into ours. As I did this I waved through the windshield to a woman who must have been my neighbor. She just smiled and waved back. In New York they would kill you for less, but there were no hard feelings in the suburbs.

I ran back into the house and continued to do small tasks. Zachery woke up and Grainne put him in a little buggy on wheels that had a dashboard that lit up and made noise whenever he pounded on various buttons with his hands. He followed us around, making noise, as we went in and out of rooms doing our chores. For lunch Grainne made us sandwiches of mozzarella, tomato, and basil on a baguette drizzled with olive oil. While we were eating Zachery joined us, snacking on a handful of Cheerios that Grainne sprinkled on the dashboard of his buggy.

After this she worked in the garden for a bit while I sat on the couch and read the latest issue of *The Economist*. Zachery played on the rug next to me. Every once in a while he'd come over for a hug, or else would scream out, "Dada, look," at which point I'd admire whatever it was he was doing. It began to get dark and I was getting hungry. Grainne, as if reading my mind, came back into the house and asked about dinner. She was sweaty and her knees and elbows were covered in dirt. "Satish Palace?" she said. "Like we'd talked about?"

"Oh, I don't know. I thought maybe we could go out. Besides, I'm not really in the mood for Chinese."

“Indian,” Grainne said. “We’d talked about doing that for our anniversary, remember? Just getting some takeout and staying in?”

“Oh, yeah,” I said, as if it had just come to me. “Then let’s do that.”

“Great,” she said. “Let me go take a quick shower and then I’ll order.”

She kissed me again, this time on the lips. Her lips tasted like salt. I could hear her upstairs, going into the bathroom, and then water rushed through the ancient pipes in the walls making a whooshing noise. I reached for Zachery on the floor and lifted him up, placing him next to me on the couch. In a magazine rack were a number of children’s books. I picked one out called *A Walk in New York* and began reading it to him. He seemed to like the pictures and wanted to help with turning the pages (which he could do, but only by grabbing them in clumps), but he didn’t seem to understand the story or connect with the narrative. So instead of bothering with the text, I pointed out the various landmarks and how I had come into contact with them after a decade spent in Manhattan.

“See that?” I said, pointing to the page. “That’s the Flatiron Building. I worked in that building for years. Right *there*. That was my window. Isn’t that amazing? Daddy worked *right* there. In that building in the book.”

Zachery clapped and giggled. This caused me to hug him tight, and he hugged me back. Grainne came downstairs wearing jeans and an old Flaming Lips T-shirt I’d bought her years ago. She pulled a binder of take-out menus from a shelf and asked, “The usual?”

I nodded. Zachery, watching me, also nodded.

She hit a number on speed dial and then asked for an order of chicken tikka masala, vegetable samosas, sag paneer, and two garlic naan.

“They said it’d be about fifteen minutes.”

“Great,” I said. I picked up Zachery and plopped him down on the floor. He took the book with him, flipping through the pages and making various sounds and pointing at the drawings. “I’ll go get it.”

Grainne kissed me goodbye and then sat on the ground with Zachery, watching as he pawed at the book.

I hopped in the car and then pulled out my iPhone. I Googled “Satish Palace Montclair New Jersey” and, from there, got directions and mapped out a course from Jeff’s house to the restaurant. It wasn’t too far away, so I didn’t think I’d get lost.

The town was just beginning to come alive, segueing from a quiet early-fall day to a typical Saturday night. I passed two movie theaters, both of which had lines of people outside waiting to get in. Restaurants were filling up. There seemed to be a good mix of new stores and old; an Urban Outfitters and Anthropologie just down the street from a huge, rambling used bookstore called The Book Exchange. It seemed like a nice place to live.

I found Bloomfield Avenue and parked across the street from Satish Palace. It was next door to two other restaurants: an Italian place called Rustica Café and what looked like a Cuban or Mexican place called Habeneros. The green awning for Satish Palace had ripped and was hanging limp from the steel armature. This made me think of the blue awning outside the Wakefield. Like an actor shutting out the outside world so he can concentrate on remembering his lines and staying in character, I tried to forget about the Wakefield.

As I went in, the guy seemed to know me. He called me “Mr. Jeff” and mentioned throwing in something extra. “Because I know that you like it.” I just nodded and smiled and put a five-dollar bill in the tip jar. Back in the Jetta the Indian food filled up the car with the aroma of spices that smelled, to me, alien. I was hungry but wasn’t sure I was hungry for

what I was bringing home. At a stoplight I peeked into the brown paper bag, but all I could see was tin foil. I poked the foil and it felt soft and warm under my touch.

As I backtracked along Glenridge Avenue, heading to North Willow, I thought I saw someone I knew on the sidewalk. I'd always heard that lots of publishing people lived in Montclair, so I assumed that it was a colleague. Someone from the office or one of my previous jobs. But as I looked closer it looked like Luther Blissett, the guy from [yourefamiliar.com](http://yourefamiliar.com). It certainly *looked* like him, but I couldn't be sure. It was dark and the sidewalk was covered mostly in shadows except for the occasional pools of light from a streetlamp. I contemplated looping around the block so I could get a better look but decided not to. Grainne was at home, hungry and waiting for me.

When I got back to the house, Grainne was at the counter in the kitchen cutting a banana into small sections. She placed the banana onto a Melamine plate that had on it a colorful, swirling caterpillar. She then cut up some penne pasta into small rings, adding it to the plate along with a few green beans that she'd cut into bite-size pieces. This, I assumed, was Zachery's dinner. No samosas or tikka masala for him.

Grainne brought Zachery's plate to the dining room and set it on a Fisher Price highchair that was plastic except for a vinyl, cushioned seat covered in cartoon drawings of giraffes and monkeys. I set down the bag of take-out on a ceramic heat pad in the center of the table. As I was taking the various items from the bag, Grainne poured us glasses of white wine from an elongated bottle, the kind that usually means a Gewürztraminer or Riesling.

Grainne then sat down and started serving herself, opening the various containers and saying "Yum" every time she did. In his high chair Zachery began to eat, grabbing the bits of food with his chubby thumb and forefinger, using them in a pincher grasp.



I sat down but didn't quite know what to do with the food. I guessed Jeff liked this stuff, but I had no idea what any of it was. I watched and saw what Grainne did. How she made a bed of rice and then put scoops of the sag paneer and tikka masala on it. I then did the same thing. We each cut into our samosas, and I watched her to see which sauce she dipped her forkfuls of peas and potatoes into. As she unwrapped a bundle of tin foil, she said, "Hey, they threw in an extra garlic naan." She smiled at me. "They always do that."

"Yeah," I said. "The guy told me. I gave him a tip."

"Oh yeah? How much?"

"Five dollars."

"Silly," she said, rapping me on the knuckles. "The naan's only three-fifty."

I just smiled and said, "It's the thought that counts. Besides, this is really good."

The samosas were like empanadas, or wontons, and a bit spicy but otherwise were delicious. I liked the tikka masala, but the sag paneer turned out to be mostly creamed spinach with cubes of cheese that didn't have much flavor. The naan bread was basically just thick tortillas covered in minced garlic. The sweet wine was a perfect accompaniment, as was Zachery in his highchair smiling at us as he pinched at his food.

After dinner I helped Grainne bring all the dishes into the kitchen. As she was placing the leftovers in the fridge, she said, "Will you do me a favor and give Zachery a bath and then put him to bed? I'm so tired I'm about fall right over."

At first I didn't answer. I just stood there, staring. I'd never bathed a child before and didn't really know how it was done. I could only imagine what Zachery meant to Jeff, and I didn't want to harm either of them. But I also didn't want to let this opportunity go by. I wanted to rise to the challenge and know that, if in some universe some arrangement of events had let me be a father (if only for a day), that I could handle it.

“Sure,” I finally said. “No problem.” All I could think of were those photos you see of children being bathed in sinks. I then looked at the sink, which still held a couple of dirty plates from dinner. “Should I do the dishes real fast or put him in the sink like that and wash them all at once?”

“No, silly,” Grainne said. “Use the *tub*.”

“The tub,” I repeated.

I fished Zachery out of his highchair and carried him upstairs under my arm like a football. At the top of the stairs, I didn’t know which way to turn. I saw a long hallway along which were four doors. I opened the first and came across the master bedroom. It held our bed, the one I’d slept in last night, as well a new dresser and end tables. The next room looked like Grainne’s office. I saw her computer and a number of photographs of Zachery in various frames. The third door opened onto Zachery’s nursery, and the final door was the bathroom.

The nursery was large, the walls painted baby blue. Along one wall was a changing table and a crib, and along the other wall was a dresser. A window looked out onto the backyard. The floor was covered in toys and, in the corner, a white bookshelf was filled with books. A stuffed sheep, when I stepped on it, made ocean noises instead of sheep noises. In another corner was a plastic turquoise rocking horse. There was so much stuff; Zachery may have owned more things than I did. I stripped Zachery of his clothes and tossed them into a hamper that was shaped like a bumblebee. His blue onesie got caught on one of the hamper’s golden wings and hung there like sneakers in power lines.

I picked him up and walked into the bathroom. I didn’t have anywhere to put him (the toilet seat would be too cold, the bathmat looked dirty), so I continued to keep him hoisted against my hip as I filled the tub with only a few inches of lukewarm water. I then

gradually slipped Zachery into the tub, supporting his neck and head with my left hand. As I did this his arms whooshed around like windmills, kicking up warm splashes of water. When he was finally sitting down, I turned him so that his back was against the far side of the tub. In the expanse on either side of him I dropped a few toys that sat next to the tub in a wicker basket: a green rubber frog and a plastic yellow duck. I cupped my hands and used them to scoop water over his chest and back; when I did this he squealed in delight. I then grabbed a bar of soap and began to wash him.

I couldn't believe how slippery he became. His whole body seemed to be covered in a thin film of soap that made holding him difficult. Not that he seemed to mind. Zachery interpreted all of my grabbing on to him as tickling, and this caused him to howl and splash, which made my job even more difficult.

"Come on, Zachery," I pleaded. "Calm down, buddy. You're not making this easy."

I gritted my teeth and tried to continue washing him, holding on to him with one hand—making sure he didn't slip or hit his head—while the other hand poured water over his soapy body. It was hard work and, after only a few minutes, there was sweat on my forehead. I thought of all of those paintings by Cassatt and realized that life's nothing like that.

"Are you a clean bird?" I asked. "Or a dirtybird? Huh? Which is it?"

After giving him a final rinsing—making sure he didn't have any pockets of soap trapped under his arms or behind his knees—I drained the tub and then grabbed a towel that had a hood and was covered in cowboys and lassos. Zachery loved the towel and kept using the hood to play peek-a-boo when all I wanted to do was dry him off.

"No dada," he kept saying through giggles whenever he pulled the towel over his head. Where his face would be I saw only cactus, spurs, and a saddle. "No dada," he

repeated, amazed and delighted that he had the power to make me disappear. It made me think about tomorrow, when I'd leave this house and go back to Hoboken. *No dada.*

I patted down his head, which wasn't round like you'd expect. It had bumps and plateaus, some of which—I knew—were still soft. His hair was so thin. It was there, but you could almost see through it. This made me grin because my own hair—after having thinned out for years—felt just like it. Zachery smelled wonderful; fresh and pure and like nothing and everything. What you imagine a cloud would smell like.

He started to cry as he looked up at me, and this made me cry. It was only when he cried that I thought that he looked like me. It was only at that moment that I saw my face in his. It was the nose and the chin; the eyes belonged to Grainne, but the chin and nose made him mine.

I picked him up, carried him into the nursery, and placed him on the changing table. I opened the dresser and saw row after row of socks, booties, undershirts, absorbent bibs, jammies, and sleepers. I pulled from the drawer a gray sleeper that had a robot on the front. I put him in a diaper and then began to dress him, Zachery stretching out his arms and legs to help. Once I had him fitted snugly into his pajamas, I gave him a kiss on the forehead and then lowered him into his crib. He stared up at me, smiling. But then his eyelids stuttered closed, fighting against sleep. I didn't know if I would be here when he woke up or would already be gone, headed back to Manhattan and that bench near the Bethesda Fountain.

I sat down in a rocking chair placed to the side of the crib and slowly rocked back and forth as Zachery fell into rhythmic breathing and was soon asleep. "That's it, go to sleep," I said slowly, encouraging him although he no longer needed it. "That's it."

I then looked around the nursery, thinking, *This is what it would have felt like.* I began to cry, softly at first but then harder. I did my best to stifle the tears, not wanting to wake up

Zachery, but soon I was sobbing uncontrollably. I reached out and grabbed a lightweight cream-colored bib that said *It's all about me* embroidered on its front in black thread. I pressed the bib against my face, both to sop up the tears and to silence my weeping. The bib was soft and smelled like Dreft. For some reason, this only made me cry harder.

When I headed downstairs, Grainne was on the couch reading a *New Yorker*. The room was lit with only one lamp, by which Grainne was reading. Through the curtains I could see streetlights illuminating the various driveways, a car in each one. Grainne looked at the soaked spots on my shirt. I didn't know which were from my tears or from Zachery's bath, but I hoped that Grainne blamed the bath. I sat down next to her.

"Jeff," she said, "are you okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

She paused before saying, "I heard you crying on the baby monitor."

I turned fast to look at her.

She quickly added, "I didn't mean to. I just wanted to see how Zachery was doing.

And that's when I heard you."

"Work," I said slowly, thinking that would suffice as an easy, blanket explanation.

"It's just work. Stress, I guess. Too much to do. To worry about."

She reached out and kneaded my neck with her left hand. As she did this the diamonds in her engagement ring scratched into my skin. This made me think of our wedding; what a wonderful day that had been.

"You sure that's all it is?" she asked quietly.

"Yes," I replied softly, lost in the rhythm of her massage. "That's it."

“It’s not the other thing?”

I opened my eyes.

“What other thing?”

She looked at me strangely. Then, in an instant, the look on her face changed. She now seemed guarded and cautious, maybe even afraid. Or maybe I was just being paranoid or a bundle of nerves or something else that wasn’t helping the situation.

“Well, anyway,” Grainne said, closing the magazine. “I’m going up to bed.”

She got up off the couch. I just froze.

“You coming?” she asked.

“In a minute,” I said. I glanced toward the small den set off from the living room, hiding behind the French doors. “I just want to check some email. Maybe jot down a few more ideas.”

“Okay,” Grainne said skeptically. “But don’t stay up *too* late. You need to start winding down. Otherwise you’ll be up all night.”

“I know,” I said softly. “I know.”

As she retreated up the staircase each stair creaked with each step, echoing throughout the large house but getting fainter as she rose to the second floor. I could then hear her walking above me. I traced her steps in the sounds, following with the tip of my finger as she brushed her teeth in the bathroom and then got in bed. The mattress springs were the last thing I heard. I then got up and went into the den and sat down at the desk. The neighborhood was so quiet it made its own kind of noise. Looking out between the drapes I could see stars.

I didn’t want to go upstairs because I didn’t want to go to sleep. I didn’t want the day to end. I didn’t want to go back to my old life. I hadn’t even told Grainne yet that I had to

get up early tomorrow and go into the city. What kind of excuse would I make up? I had no idea. I just hoped something would come to me when it came time to tell her. Or what if I just chose not to go? It was too much to think about, so I didn't.

From upstairs, Grainne softly called out to me. "Come up to bed." I didn't move; I just sat there. The silence all around me grew.

"Come up to bed," Grainne called out again, this time a bit louder.

I reluctantly got up from chair. As I was crossing the living room I stubbed my toe on a leg of the sofa, knocking the couch against the wall. A picture frame of Zachery fell forward with a clatter onto the glass top of an end-table. Grainne shouted downstairs, "Jeff? Is that you?"

I WALKED AWAY from the Malibu diner, the other Jeffs—who'd been in front of me as we left—going their separate ways: one to Manhattan and the other to Montclair. In the parking lot I spotted a silver car I remembered as Grainne's Jetta. Jeff approached and turned off the alarm just as I passed. Behind me I heard the car door open and close. The Jetta started as I crossed the street and began to walk down Park, heading south, to the apartment I used to live in with my ex-wife.

The breakfast was a bit tense. I arrived first and picked a booth in the corner, separate from the tables lining the window and as far away as possible from the college kids nursing their hangovers. I was halfway through my second cup of coffee when the other Jeffs came in just a few minutes apart. Both were wearing the outfit we'd agreed upon yesterday: jeans, polo, sneakers. The waitress, when we were all finally gathered, froze when she saw us until one of the Jeffs simply said, "Triplets." It was as if she'd been paused but with that one simple word we'd hit the *play* button. She unfroze and took our order. Ten



minutes later she brought out three identical breakfasts. After setting them down on the table—pancakes with a side of bacon—she looked us over, winked, and said, “*Triples.*”

At first we were lost without Dr. Schwartz to guide the discussion. No one knew what to say. We didn’t know where the boundaries were, didn’t know how to start a conversation. What was there to talk about except what had brought us together? And we still didn’t have a good grasp on exactly what that was. Since no one was speaking, I dug my keys out of my pocket, placed them on the table, and said, “Here. Seventy-third Street.” One of the Jeffs took the keys. Another of the Jeffs gave the keys to his house and a map on how to get there. A different Jeff gave me his keys to the apartment in Hoboken. It was a lot to keep straight, and we were halfway through the pancakes before we were done exchanging keys.

We finished the meal mostly in silence, chewing instead of speaking. When the food was gone, two of the Jeffs idly stared at the other customers while I turned over and over in my hands a yellow plastic holder advertising weekend brunch drink specials: mimosas and Bloody Marys for \$2.00. The check came and rather than split it three ways—that seemed too ironic—one of the Jeffs paid, I’m not sure which.

As I walked down Park Avenue, cars passed me heading north toward Fourteenth Street. I dropped my head down, trying not to make eye contact with any of the drivers. I didn’t want to be recognized. After all, this was the town where my marriage had crumbled, where my wife had left me. We had friends here, people who would remember the fights and crying and one of us sleeping on the couch because neither of us could stand the sight of each other for another second. I glanced down at my watch, only to find it flashing twelve o’clock. As another car passed I thought, *But then again, maybe someone will recognize me as*

*Grainne's husband, the man she's still married to.* I had yet to get that fact straight: in this world, we'd stayed together.

It was a cool morning and I pushed my hands into the pockets of my jeans for warmth. When we'd come up with our plan yesterday to meet at the Malibu—all of us agreeing to wear the same clothes—we hadn't been smart enough to figure on including a light jacket. Now that it was mid-October, and the weather had finally turned, it was starting to get cold.

I took a left at Eleventh Street, heading west. The next block was Garden. The surrounding streets were some of the most quaint and quietest in the neighborhood, the best in Hoboken. Single-family brownstones, red brick townhouses, the occasional freestanding home decorated in Victorian splendor. Grainne and I, when a child was still something we were discussing, used to walk these blocks and imagine where we might live. It was hopelessly out of our budget, but still we pretended. "That one," she'd say, pointing to a home that must have cost millions. "No—you're crazy," I'd insist, pointing at one that cost more. "*That one.*"

I passed Bloomfield. Farther down—I could almost see its purple awning—was where we'd gone for marriage counseling. We went for about three months, trying to talk out our problems. Trying to see if we were going to stay together or was I going to torpedo the marriage. The first few weeks we talked about petty things. She watched too much TV. I bought too many records and books. She wasted her time. I wasted my money. Finally, a few sessions in—after all of our dancing around the big subject—the therapist said, "Grainne, it sounds to me like if Jeff doesn't want to have a child, then you're going to want to leave. Is that correct?" After this there was just silence. I can't even remember breathing. That was the first time the idea of ending the marriage had been mentioned.

The thought had made me ecstatic and terrified all at once. I would be a failure. I would be given a second chance. Nothing had turned out how I wanted. I had an opportunity to make everything turn out okay. It would be a mistake to stay. It would be a mistake to leave. On the walk back to the apartment that day—both Grainne and I in a daze; we were practically sleepwalking—my mind began to rapidly fill up with plans. I would, after the divorce, get an apartment in the city again. The Upper West Side. I would run in the park, like I used to when I was a bachelor. On Friday nights I would order a pizza and on Saturday night Chinese. I would read lots of books and listen to music and be myself again. It would be just like that song. It would be just like starting over.

So I did it, I left.

I passed Helmers, then crossed Washington. I passed Maxwell's.

But he didn't do it. The other Jeff stayed.

I turned the corner at Hudson. The apartment was now just a block away. Kids played in Elysian Park and, as I always did, I tried to block out the sound.

I crossed the corner at Tenth Street.

I could see the building, its red brick turned almost orange through the years. I looked up and saw our big window on the fourth floor. The blinds were open and the air conditioner was still in, the one I always dreaded taking in and out every year (afraid it was going to slip from my grip and fall to the sidewalk). Grainne's Jetta was parked at the curb. A different Jetta, owned by a different Grainne. I heard in my head the only words Jeff had told me that morning in terms of preparing me for what I would find when I got to the apartment. He said, "She's home."

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The lobby was just like I remembered it: a long hallway with five doors, all of which were covered in full-length mirrors. Two huge faux-Persian rugs ran the entire length of the lobby, and on the walls were 19<sup>th</sup> century etchings showing Hoboken as it used to be. In one, a man walked with a woman carrying a parasol. The caption read: *Hoboken, 1860*. Baseball, supposedly, had been invented in the park on the corner. The building was named after it: the Elysian.

I hit the button for the elevator. The building was from the '20s and there had always been problems with it when I lived here: pipes bursting, the tub leaking, no hot water, no cold water, no water at all. When the elevator arrived, I got on and pressed the button for the fourth floor. The inside was just as I remembered it. It felt like no time had passed; I was coming home from running errands and Grainne would greet me with a smile and a kiss.

I got out at the fourth floor and took Jeff's keys out of my pocket. It took me a few seconds to remember which key went with what lock. Finally I figured it out, inserted the key, and turned it.

"I'm home," I said, my voice echoing down the hallway.

"Okay, sweetie," Grainne called out. It sounded like she was on the couch. That's where she usually was, either watching TV or sitting there with her laptop sitting on a TV tray, her ersatz office.

I walked slowly down the hall, breathing in the smell of the apartment. The scent of the place was exactly as I remembered it. In the mirror at the end of the hall, my eyes looked sunken and tired. With another step I could see the edge of the dining room and beyond it, through the big windows overlooking Hudson, the buildings on the other side of the street. To the left I spotted a sliver of kitchen with its Tuscan-yellow paint job and the plates on the wall Grainne had bought in Mexico before we met.

“Where are you, sweetie?” she called out, sensing I was stalling in the hallway.

Even though I wanted to see her, I was scared and nervous. I couldn’t put it off any longer. I turned the corner and there she was.

Grainne was sitting on the far end of the couch, surrounded by *The New York Times* and a bunch of manila folders stuffed with work. She was wearing jeans and an orange T-shirt. Her hair was short, just like when we met; black bangs hung over her brown eyes. She looked gorgeous and I wanted to cry.

“How was breakfast?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said, hoping she didn’t expect me to elaborate since I didn’t know who Jeff had told her he was with. Why hadn’t we rehearsed?

“How were the pancakes?” she said with a grin.

“How did you know I had pancakes?”

“It’s what you always have.” She got off the couch and enveloped me in a hug. “Or am I wrong?”

“No,” I managed to squeeze out before she kissed me.

After she grabbed me I didn’t know how to reciprocate. In the last six months of the relationship, once we knew it was falling apart, things like this didn’t happen. By the end we were just roommates. I folded my arms clumsily across her back, hoping she couldn’t tell how bad I was at this, how I’d forgotten how to hold her.

“You even smell like syrup,” she said.

She let go of me and sat back on the couch. Her laptop was open on the end table. In the background a CD that I owned and had just come out was playing; this Jeff must have bought it, too.

“What’s been going on around here?” I asked.

“Just trying to put the finishing touches on this presentation.”

The manila folders were stuffed with color printouts held together with black binder clips. On top of the folders were a few red pens and blue and yellow highlighters.

I sat down on the couch, my arms feeling chilled after the walk from the diner. Grainne went back to her work. I just sat there, looking around the room that hadn't changed since the divorce.

“God, this is boring,” Grainne said a few minutes later. “I need a break. Do you want to go with me to the store?”

“Sure.”

“Wow,” Grainne said, surprised. “You *never* want to go to the store. Are you okay?”

I just smiled and said, “Never better. Let's go.”

She grabbed her purse and we headed downstairs. On the way out of the building we ran into some neighbors. They lived on the second floor, were about our age, and didn't have kids. They were nice and we occasionally saw them socially.

“We haven't see you guys since the Fourth,” the husband said; I think his name was Mark. “We'd love to have you over for dinner next week.”

Grainne looked at me for approval.

“Sure,” I said.

*Why not?*

We pulled into the parking lot of ShopRite. I grabbed a shopping cart and we then went through the store methodically, up and down every aisle. Grainne led the way, dropping

items into the cart every couple of feet. After she put two gallons of milk in the cart, she asked, “What do you want for dinner?”

“How about pasta?”

“What kind?”

Grainne cooked a lot of things that I liked, but the first thing that came to mind was orecchiette with sausage, carrots, and peas. Whenever I missed her, that pasta was one of the things I missed. After I mentioned this, her eyes lit up. I felt like kicking myself for leaving that look.

“Perfect,” she said. “I have carrots at home, from making your muffins, but let me round up the rest.”

After another twenty minutes we were done. The cart was full of staple items for the week, as well as what we needed for dinner. We paid for the groceries, wheeled our cart out to the Jetta, and I put the half-dozen bags in the trunk while Grainne started the car.

It would have sounded to anyone else like a boring way to spend an afternoon, but I couldn’t believe how warm I felt bathing in the domesticity. I hadn’t spent a Saturday like this in a long time. As we were pulling out of the parking lot, I thought of Central Park. I wondered what the crowds would be like today, or whether or not I would have had a good run. It was the same itch I’d had when we first moved to Hoboken. The whole world seemed to exist across the river. I felt exiled here, shut off from everything. After the divorce I was sure that moving back to New York would erase this feeling. It did, but I then discovered something else to miss: the life I’d carved out with Grainne in New Jersey. Without her, and the things we did as a married couple, I felt exiled, shut off.

“Do you want to stop at Sparrow to get some wine?”

“Sure,” I said. “Maybe a nice red? It’s getting chilly out.”

“Yeah,” Grainne said. “My dad told me about a new kind of wine we should try.”

“Sounds good.”

“And while we’re there, can I run to the drug store? I need a few things.”

“Sweetheart, there’s no place else I’d rather be.”

Grainne looked at me skeptically, as if I were being a smartass. I was telling the truth.

By the time we got home and found a parking space it was almost dark. The air was cold and there was a breeze. This reminded me of meeting the others that morning at the Malibu Diner. It’d only been a few hours ago, but it seemed farther away than that. I wondered, for a second, how the other Jeff was doing back at my apartment on Seventy-third Street. I also tried to picture the other one, with Zachery in Montclair, but pushed that thought from my mind. Instead, I carried the groceries while Grainne fished her keys out of her purse. Once inside the building she stopped for the mail, while I pressed the button for the elevator with my elbow.

“Anything interesting?” I asked.

“Just some bills.”

As we rode up to the fourth floor, I looked at the assorted envelopes in her hand. I could see the logos and return address of two insurance companies, our bank, and a card someone had mailed addressed to us both.

Grainne opened the door to the apartment and held it open for me. It all felt so natural. Our years together came back in a flood of memories. I walked past her, toward the kitchen, depositing the bags on the counter.

“You want to help me with dinner?”



“I don’t know about that,” I said. I was never a very good cook and she knew it. She must have been teasing. “But I can provide moral support.”

“That’s just as good.”

Grainne unpacked the groceries, keeping what she needed for the pasta on the counter. As she did this I uncorked the wine and poured two glasses. I handed a glass to her and then sat on a wooden footstool placed against the wall near the fridge. I used to always do this. I’d come home, Grainne would be making dinner, and I’d sit on the footstool—with a glass of wine—and tell her about my day. It had been over a year since I’d seen her; I had a backlog of days.

“You’ll never guess who I ran into the other day at Garden of Eden.”

“I have no idea,” I said, meaning it.

“Mary,” she said.

“My mom’s friend from California?”

“No, our marriage counselor. *Remember?*”

I’d thought of her just that morning as I’d walked from the diner to the apartment.

“What did she say?”

“Nothing much.” Grainne stopped peeling a carrot and turned to me. “It was kind of awkward, actually.” She then turned back to the sink and continued peeling. “I didn’t know what the protocol was. Like, should I say hi? Should I just ignore her?”

“What did you do?”

“I said hi.”

She finished peeling the carrot and moved on to another.

“Did she ask you anything?”

“She did, actually. I was prepared just to make small talk. Ask about that husband of hers that did the oil paintings. Remember that one from her office, of the tree with all the branches? But instead she asked about us.”

“What did she ask?”

“Oh, what you’d expect, I guess. Did we ever have a child? Were we still married?”

“What did you tell her?”

The peeling paused yet again; it was a dumb thing to have said.

“I said no on the child, obviously.” Grainne stopped speaking, and began to breathe heavily. But then she straightened out and continued. “But I told her that yes, we were still married.”

I took a sip of the wine; it was good. Her dad really knew his stuff.

“Was she surprised?”

“About which?”

“Either, I guess.”

“Well, she knew about the kid thing, obviously. We were always honest with her, you remember that.”

“Yes, honest,” I said, looking into my wine. “But—what about us?”

Grainne turned to me. She traded the peeler for her own glass of wine and took a sip.

“Yeah, she did seem surprised actually.”

“Why?”

“I think you know why.”

This made me wonder just how close Jeff had come to making the mistake that I’d made. Often in the past year I’d regretted what I’d done; sorry and full of remorse that I’d

shattered this life. I then wondered if Jeff ever regretted *not* shattering it. There were so many ways to be sorry.

Grainne put her glass of wine down on the counter and went back to preparing the dinner. Once the carrots were peeled she cut them into discs. After that she took a box of frozen peas from the freezer.

“Remember the time you used edamame instead?”

She grinned. It was nice having history with someone.

“That was good, wasn’t it?”

She set aside the peas to thaw and then began to mince a clove of garlic using a mezzaluna. I took another sip of the wine. It was good and I was getting a buzz. It made me want to have a cigarette, but I didn’t see ashtrays anywhere. I figured Jeff had quit. Good for him.

“After dinner,” Grainne was saying, “do you want to watch a movie? A new Netflix arrived.”

This brought back memories. Most weekends this is what we did: we’d watch movies. Occasionally we’d play a game, getting out Scrabble or Trivial Pursuit. Once a month or so we’d go into the city for dinner and maybe a show, and less frequently we’d go to a party or meet another couple for a meal. But for the most part, on weekends, we made or ordered-in dinner and then watched a movie. It struck me that that’s also what I did in my brownstone on Seventy-third Street. I’d created a whole lot of pain in order to lead mostly the same life.

“What movie is it?”

“It’s called *The Three*. Something about a serial killer and a detective and split personalities.”

I grimaced and Grainne noticed.

“Don’t get mad at me. *You’re* the one who put it in the queue.”

I got up from the footstool and stood behind her. I snaked my arms around her waist and nuzzled my mouth behind her right ear, kissing her neck. She smelled just like I remembered: wonderful. I said, “Not exactly.”

“Stop it,” she giggled, “that tickles. And I’m holding a knife. Someone could get hurt.”

“That’s a mezzaluna, it’s not a knife. It’d be very hard to mince someone to death.”

“Seriously, Jeff, *please*. Just let me make dinner?”

I stopped kissing and stepped away, thinking I’d done something wrong.

“And maybe after dinner,” Grainne said, grinning, “we’ll go to bed early and *won’t* watch the movie. Okay?”

“Okay,” I replied.

“Good, now go do some writing or something and let me finish this.”

She then took from one of the bottom cupboards a huge pot she always used for pasta and began to fill it up from the sink. After this she grabbed a red container of sea salt that looked like a can of Pringles.

“Okay,” I repeated, and then took my glass of wine down the hall, to the extra room I used as a study.

I walked down the hall slowly, the sound of Grainne making dinner getting more and more faint with every step that I took. When I entered the room, I was amazed to see it was still painted the light yellow we’d hated since the day we moved in. Our landlords, who’d lived

here before us—they'd rented the apartment when they couldn't sell it—had two kids, and this extra room had been the nursery. We'd always talked about painting it something more masculine but always put it off. The room also had dingy white carpeting, another thing we always said we wanted to remove but obviously never did.

I sat down at the desk. Everything looked exactly as I remembered it: the cheap Ikea desk, the MacBook, the silver desk lamp that looked like an antique but had been bought new at Pottery Barn. The cheap desk chair hurt my back seconds after I sat down, the way it always did. We made decent money, so why hadn't Jeff—after all these years—bought a better chair?

I opened the laptop. A number of windows were open, most of them websites like Amazon and *The New York Times*. But one of them was Gmail. This piqued my interest since I didn't have a Gmail account. I couldn't help but look at the screen, scrolling through the messages. All of them were recent and had been sent by luke@yourefamiliar.com. That address didn't mean anything to me. I clicked into the *Sent* messages and scrolled down to the bottom of the screen, finding the first message in the series. It was dated just a few days ago.

The email said:

*Luther,*

*Sorry if I was grouchy when we met at Treble. I'm obviously not responding very well to this situation and I don't really know how to act. This all seems very strange. But what we talked about helped, and I'm going to try and remember what you said. I'll try not to bother you with more*

*questions about what's going on, but I can't make any promises. And in terms of the plan we discussed, I'll keep that in mind but only as a last resort.*

*Thanks again,*

*Jeff*

Luther wrote back later that day, telling him not to worry, that it was going to be okay. He'd help in any way that he could. He also added a postscript that said, simply, *Call me Luke*. Below this was the following signature:

*Luther Blissett*

*CEO and Founder*

*You're Familiar, Inc.*

*www.yourefamiliar.com*

*A website for all of you*

I read a few of the other emails, but none of them seemed to make much sense. Jeff was worried, and Luke tried to calm him down. Frustrated, I did a Google search for Luke Blissett. The only things that came up were assorted junk and a number of Facebook profiles that I was pretty sure weren't for the Luke Blissett I was looking for. Then I remembered Jeff's initial email, calling him *Luther* instead of *Luke*. I did another search, this time on "Luther Blissett." The top result was from Wikipedia. I clicked onto the page. This was the first paragraph:

*Luther Blissett is a multiple-use name, an "open reputation" informally adopted and shared by hundreds of artists and social activists all over Europe and South America since 1994.*

“What the *fuck*,” I said out loud. In the kitchen I heard Grainne open and close the oven, probably taking out the bread.

The rest of the Wikipedia page didn’t make much sense, so I clicked back to Google. The third listing was for something called the Luther Blissett Manifesto. I clicked on the link. It wasn’t much of a page; just a couple of long paragraphs that made about as much sense as the Wikipedia page. The manifesto was broken into two parts: MEETING UP WITH A DANGEROUS CHARACTER: LUTHER BLISSETT and LUTHER BLISSETT. NOTES ON THE NATURE OF THE CONSPIRACY. I glanced through each of the sections, but it all seemed like situationist gibberish. Phrases like “linguistic cross-fertilisation” and “authoritarian codification” were peppered throughout. The last sentence of the first section jumped out at me:

*Luther Blissett is not a 'teamwork identity' as reported by the journalists; rather, it is a MULTIPLE SINGLE: the 'Luther Blissetts' don't exist, only Luther Blissett exist. Today we can infuse ourselves with vitality by exploring any possibility of escaping the conventional identities.*

My eyes scanned the text, trying to tie the Luther Blissett concept to whoever or whatever was sending Jeff those emails, but I couldn’t make sense of any of it.

“Sweetie?” Grainne called out from the kitchen and I jumped. “Can you come set the table?”

I hesitated before answering, wanting more time to try and figure out what was happening.

“Jeff, honey, are you *there?*”

“Uh—yeah,” I shouted. “Coming.”

I closed the laptop, left the room, and then began to set the table so I could have dinner with the woman who’d divorced me the year before.

During dinner I was edgy and distracted. I kept thinking of Luther and those emails. Who was he and what did it all mean? As we were finishing our salads, it hit me that the website listed in the email signature had been mentioned last week by one of the Jeffs. During that first session with Dr. Schwartz, he said it was a social networking site for split personalities. Feeling torn and splintered, I wondered if that’s just what I was: a remnant of a bit of sanity now long lost.

I contemplated telling Grainne who I was and what I thought was happening to me. Spilling the truth about the other Jeffs, even the one who’d died and the one I’d tried to kill back in California. I then wondered if Jeff had already told her. Was she, somehow, in on it? In one of Luther’s emails he’d mentioned her, saying something about *You may need her help. How much you choose to tell her is up to you.* But if I told her about any aspect of this, it would have forced me to tell her about the Jeff in Montclair, the one with the child. She would claw at me for details and I’d had to give them.

As I was thinking all of this, Grainne looked up and smiled. She had a leaf of baby greens stuck in her teeth and I told her so. She then grinned shyly and began to dig it out with a fingernail. It was just about the least romantic thing you could imagine, but I thought



it was wonderful. This made me forget about trying to explain or tell her anything. I just wanted to enjoy the night.

After dinner we didn't watch the movie, we played Scrabble. For most of the game I stared at Grainne instead of my letters. She beat me easily and by a large margin and I couldn't have cared less. It was lovely to just sit there with her. It reminded me of the early days and nights between us, when things were good.

"You didn't put up much of a fight," she said as we were putting the game away.

All I did was grin and say, "No, I didn't."

We'd continued to drink while we were playing. Even though right after dinner I was dying for a cigarette, by the time we were halfway through the game the craving had subsided. As I was brushing my teeth, I was glad I hadn't smoked. It was always an awful feeling to taste ash instead of toothpaste.

From the dresser in the extra room I pulled out a pair of blue pajamas. I felt self-conscious going to bed in just my boxers, which was how I usually slept. Before heading into the bedroom I checked my breath and tried to comb what little hair I have left by raking my right hand over my head.

"Pajamas?" Grainne said when I walked into the bedroom.

"Well, I figured, you know—it's getting colder."

"But you always wake up in the middle of the night hot."

I just shrugged and got into bed. It was strange how much she knew about me. Somewhere out there the Grainne who divorced me still had this information in her head; so many wasted bits of her brain being used by information she'd now never need.

“Listen,” Grainne said as she began taking off her jewelry and putting the pieces into assorted places: the rings into a box, the earrings onto a stainless steel tree. “I’m sorry if I was short at dinner.”

“Short?” I said. My mind raced through the meal. I thought it had been fine, but maybe there’d been something I missed.

“Forget it,” I said. I pulled the covers up to my neck and was already hot.

“It’s just, I’ve missed you the past couple of weeks.”

Her Jeff had been spying on me from the Wakefield; I had no idea what he’d told Grainne in order to get out of the house.

“Well, you know,” I said, hoping she would again fill in the blank.

“Yes, I know,” she said, helpfully. “*Work work work.*”

“You know how important it is to me.”

“Yes, but Jeff, you’re not indispensable. Don’t take this personally—there are other people out there who could do your job.”

There were certainly two I could think of.

“But that’s what I’m afraid of, Gran. The second they realize you’re dispensable, guess what?”

She rolled her eyes. “I know, I know. They’ll dispense of you. You tell me that all the time.”

There was silence. She and I had had this conversation at least a half-dozen times when we were married. How many more times had the other Jeff and her had it? Ten? Twenty? Would they just keep going on in this pattern?

“Anyway,” I said, ending the conversation. I used to use the word *anyway* as a segue to a new topic but, somewhere in my thirties, I began to use it simply to signal when I was

done talking. Grainne could tell. As soon as I said it, she turned her back to me and began taking off her clothes. When she got to her bra I had to turn away.

On the nightstand there was a paperback by Raymond Chandler. Short stories, not a novel. *Trouble is My Business*. I picked it up and flipped to the contents page. At first glance I thought the last story in the book was called “Rewind” but, on closer inspection, noticed it was actually “Red Wind.” I turned to page 162 and began reading. *There was a desert wind blowing that night*.

I was just getting into the story when Grainne said, loudly, “Hey, wait a second.”

I looked up and saw her wearing a gray flannel nightgown I’d never seen before. She was putting lotion on her elbows but had stopped, staring at me instead.

“What—what is it?”

“Your wedding ring.” She pointed to my left hand with the bottle of lotion. The lotion smelled like almonds. “It’s gone. I just noticed.”

*Shit.*

“Oh, I—don’t know.”

“You had it on this morning before you left for breakfast.”

She put the lotion down on her nightstand and crawled into bed. This gave me a few seconds to think.

“I guess I—it must have slipped off.”

“Where, at the diner?”

“Yes, the diner.”

“I want you to go back to that diner first thing tomorrow and see if someone’s found it.”

“That’s a good idea,” I said. “I’ll do that.”

Grainne had just given me the excuse I hadn't yet thought of: how to get out of the house early tomorrow morning and meet the others back in Central Park. True, I'd need an extra excuse since walking over to the Malibu would only take ten minutes and heading to Central Park and back would take two hours. But that was the other Jeff's problem.

As Grainne reached for her own book, I saw it. Sitting on her nightstand, alongside a digital thermometer, was the notebook. Grainne had bought it to fill with charts and dates and times, a journal for keeping track of when she was ovulating so we would know when to have sex. In the end she never scribbled on a single page since, as soon as she told me what the notebook was for, we had a long talk that culminated in a big fight. Even though we'd discussed having kids when we were dating, by the time we got married I'd changed my mind. Grainne tried to talk me into it until she finally realized she couldn't. In the end she decided she wanted a child more than she wanted me, and I just couldn't—or wouldn't—change my mind.

Ever since then I'd regretted the decision and that I'd managed to lose her and then let her go. During those first few months in the brownstone on Seventy-third Street, once the novelty of being on my own had worn off—it was fun at first, I won't deny that—a deep loneliness had set in. The kind of loneliness I'd had before and tried to cure by getting married. It dawned on me as the summer ended that maybe I'd made a huge mistake. By fall I knew I'd done the wrong thing, that I'd fucked up.

Looking at the notebook—this one I could see had been filled out; pages were dog-eared and the cover showed marks from wear—I decided not to make the same mistake twice.

I turned to Grainne and she turned to me. She had a novel in her hand and a look on her face that conveyed that she wanted to get back to the novel. I said, "Come here."

She leaned over and gave me a quick kiss. I stopped her from leaving and kissed her some more, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her toward me. Grainne seemed confused.

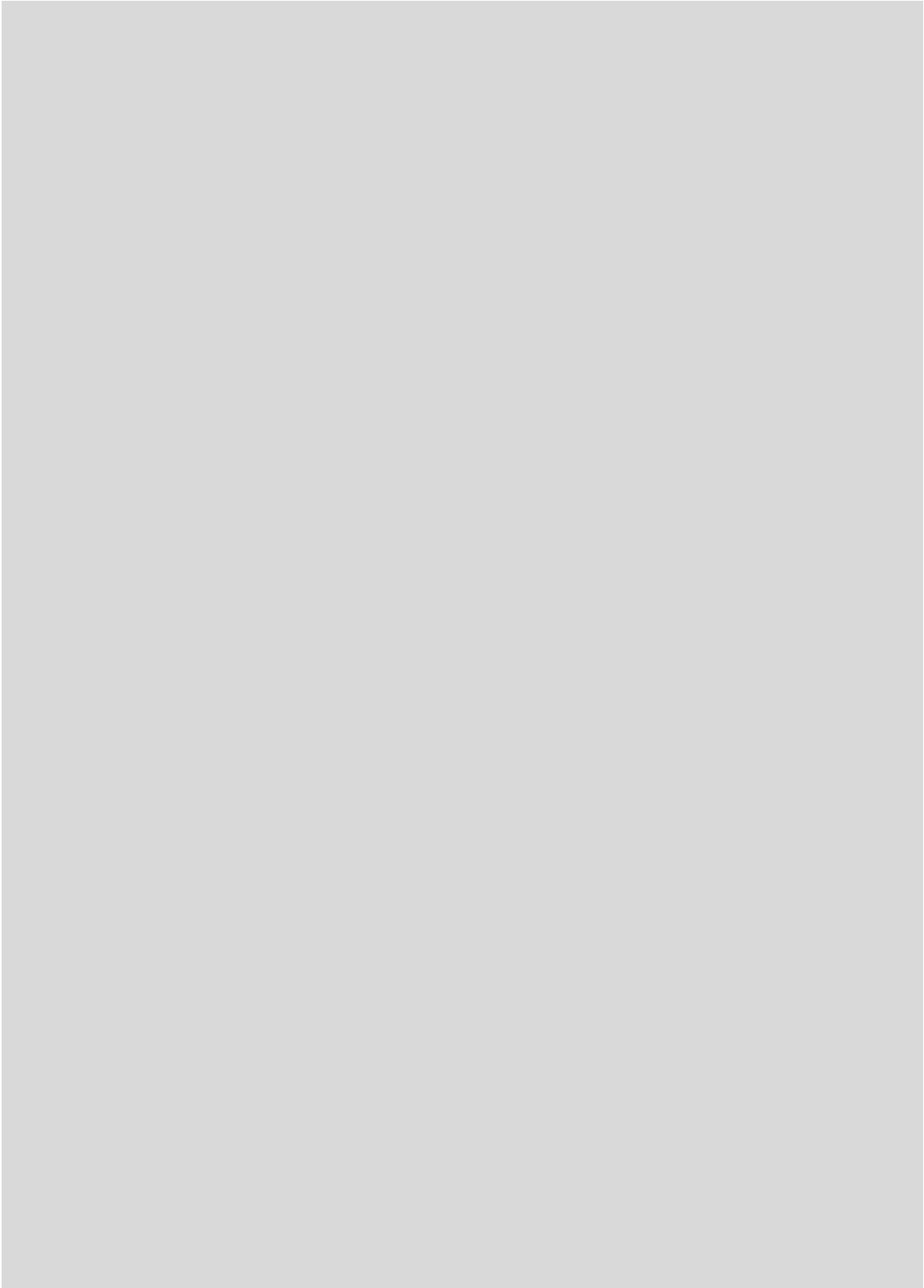
“Do you know what this means? The notebook—tonight. My cycle. It’s time.” She seemed scared but was also grinning; a combination that made you feel alive. “Not that it’s a guarantee, but it’s a pretty good chance that—”

“I know,” I said, slipping my hand under her nightgown.

“You’re *sure?*” Her voice was like a rainbow: it contained all of her emotions.

I just nodded, a tear in my eye. I turned to switch off the light and when I did I caught a glance at the clock on my bedside table. It was only 11:59; not even midnight.

Grainne laughed and said, “It’s about time.”



THE LAST THING I remembered from the night before was a female's voice. The rest was just a blur. After that I slept well, but when I woke up this morning I didn't want to get out of bed. I wanted to stay where I was; I preferred this world to the world I'd woken up in the day before. But, tired and yawning and with bags under my eyes, I crawled out of the borrowed bed and made my way to Central Park.

It was a cold morning, the coldest since the previous winter. It was the kind of morning everyone had been dreaming about all summer. A strong breeze blew green and beige leaves across the empty streets outlining the park, making me think of fall.

In a few hours Central Park would be packed with joggers, bicyclists, and Rollerbladers, but at that moment the paths were mostly empty. A few pedicabs circled around, looking for tourists tired from days of walking. As I passed a large statue of Daniel Webster, standing with his right hand tucked into his jacket, a pedicab stopped and let out a family of three. As the father paid, the young guy powering the pedicab said in an accent I couldn't recognize, "Thank you. Enjoy New York City." Looking into the trees, I saw a few had small clusters of orange and yellow.

I thought: Maybe we'll dress Zachery up for Halloween, not that he'd know what was happening. Put him in a jumper that makes him look like a pumpkin and drag him around collecting candy that I'll eat later. I thought: Maybe Leah and I will fly to Florida to save our tans, going to that hotel in Boca I went to last year for a sales conference. We haven't been dating long but I think we can handle the trip. I thought: Maybe Grainne and I will drive to her grandparents' place in New Hampshire to see the leaves changing colors, the way we've always talked about doing but never have. On the way we can stop in Concord and eat at the Mexican place we went to that first time she took me up there when we were just dating, the night of the big blackout back in New York.

As I approached the promontory overlooking the fountain, I passed a large group of school kids. They all spoke Russian in loud voices and were wearing identical I♥NY T-shirts. Two chaperones circled them like sheepdogs trying to keep the group together.

I walked down the wide steps and could see the Bethesda Fountain sitting in the middle of a huge plaza. Beyond the fountain was a small alcove of water sprouting off from the main part of the lake. Later this area would be filled with rented rowboats—Grainne and I had done that one time—but for now the water was as calm as glass. At the bottom of the steps I noticed four paths sprouting from the plaza: two led back up to Seventy-second Street and the others fed into the park itself, leading west and east with the lake in the middle. Tucked into the path on the left was a single park bench. I walked toward it.

Before sitting down I noticed a small metal plaque nailed to the top of the wooden slats that formed the back of the bench. Pressed into the dull black metal it said:

**The Best Seat in NY**

**For Ira M. Millstein**



**Chair, Central Park Conservancy 1991-1999**

**With love, the Women's Committee**

Between 1991 and 1999 I must have made thousands of decisions. That time span covered most of my twenties, included the writing and publishing of my first two novels, my relocation to New York from Los Angeles, a number of different jobs, six different apartments, the creation and destruction of a dozen romantic relationships. It didn't seem like too long a period—not even a decade; an absolute speck in terms of historical significance—but I was amazed at how much I'd managed to fit into those years. Scientists at the nearby museum of natural history would have told me that plants and animals take millennia to adapt and evolve, but back then I did that every couple of months.

I sat down and felt the slats from the park bench stiff against my back. I pulled out my iPhone to see if I was on time: 11:06 A.M.

Straight ahead I could see the Boat House. Between the Boat House and the Bow Bridge is the small outcropping of dirt, near the winding cement path, where I sat Grainne down on the root of a tree and proposed to her on Memorial Day weekend in 2005. She said yes and we were married a year later. Three years after that we divorced and I moved back to Manhattan. Three years after that we had a child and moved to Montclair. Three years after that we were childless but together in Hoboken.

After a couple of minutes, I saw another Jeff approach from path to the left, skirting the lake. He was wearing different clothes than the day before: a pair of jeans and a Gorillaz T-shirt I owned but never thought looked good on me. On him, it looked good. We'd made a pact on what we were going to wear yesterday to the Malibu Diner but hadn't really agreed upon what we were going to wear today, to Central Park. I watched him as he walked, hands

in his pockets. His hair was uncombed and he looked tired; purple patches were underneath his eyes. I thought to myself, *That's what I look like to other people.* When he sat down on my left, I caught a whiff of our cologne.

A few minutes after this, we heard footsteps coming from the plaza and saw another Jeff approach. He was wearing jeans and a half-zip sweater. He looked sheepish and weary, a grin emanating from his familiar face. He sat on my right.

For a while we were silent. We just sat there and listened to the park. Instead of speaking, we exchanged keys, sorting out who was who. The park then started to fill up despite the chilly weather. Kids went up to the edge of the lake, looking out and reaching their hands into the water while parents stood behind and tried not to look worried. Tourists posed for photos and this reminded me that I have a picture of my dad and me, from that trip he took in '97, posing in front of the same fountain. The sound of a plane overhead briefly drowned out the sound of the water and the park, but it quickly passed and the next sound I heard was laughter coming from the Russians who were finally moving on. After this I heard the jazz trio up on Seventy-second gathering and tuning up.

I looked at the huge fountain; it must have stood as high as a two-story house. On the very top was a woman with wings, her right hand outstretched. She was milky green, the color that meant she must have once been copper and shiny like a new penny. On a pedestal directly beneath her there were naked babies, the kind the Renaissance was filled with. The water, trickling down the fountain, created a constant and comforting noise.

“What’s that supposed to be, anyway?”

One of the Jeffs asked, “Is it The Fountain of Youth?”

I looked at my hands and then at the hands of the Jeff sitting next to me; they were the same except for the wedding ring.

“Civil War dead,” another Jeff said. “Lost at sea.”

Silence before someone asked: “Who died at sea in the Civil War?”

“Yeah, I thought it was all fields and ditches. Appomattox. Gettysburg. Places like that.”

“*Someone* must have died at sea,” I said, “or else this fountain wouldn’t be here. Or it would be of something else.”

It didn’t make much sense, but neither did arguing with myself. I turned back to the lake and the Boat House.

A guy walked by, along with a woman. They were both severe and artistic. He was tall and skinny with bad skin and thin hair that looked like straw. The woman he was with was not attractive. He held the upper part of her right arm with his left hand like he didn’t want her to run away. She was smoking a cigarette, and the air as they passed was scented with smoke. He reminded us of someone we went to high school with.

“Wasn’t that Jay?”

“Should we shout something out? See if it’s him?”

“What we would we shout?”

“How about, ‘Jay?’”

But we didn’t do it. None of us had enough nerve, and even the three of us put together didn’t have enough nerve.

After the smell of smoke was displaced by the cool breeze, one of the Jeffs got up to leave. He stood, paused for a second, and then walked toward the plaza without a word. I watched as he skipped up the steps but, after he reached the top, I lost sight of him. Me and the other Jeff sat there for another couple of minutes before he, too, got up and left. I gave him a head start of a few minutes before getting up myself.

I headed down the path parallel to the lake. I came to the Bow Bridge, now swarmed with couples. The first rowboat floated underneath. I decided this route was too romantic so I turned and took a path to the left. As I walked, I passed a vendor with an ice cream cart. The top of the cart said KEEP PARK CLEAN. The vendor sat dozing in a folding chair under the shade of a green-and-white umbrella.

The path curved around, leading up to a smaller plaza with another smaller fountain at its center. Behind a circle of chain-link fence were a couple of bulldozers, a huge mound of sand, and a bunch of black tubes about six inches in diameter. All of this blocked my most direct exit out of the park, forcing me to take the long way by walking back up to Seventy-second Street instead of cutting straight across. A sign hanging from the fence said DETOUR, which sounded about right.

As I walked I was thinking of all kinds of things: That bar in the Village that's like a speakeasy and you need a reservation to get in and there's not a sign on the door. I could take Leah there. *There's the statue of Daniel Webster again.* That wedding in Texas I told Grainne we could go to that's now just a few weeks away. We'd better get our plane tickets. *Here's Strawberry Fields. Through the trees I can see the Dakota, where John Lennon died in the arms of his doorman.* Zachery's birthday's coming up, and I told Grainne we'd take a look at that pre-school in Verona. But it seems too soon for pre-school. *Cabs. Look at all these cabs. Where's everyone going so early on a Sunday?*

My body moved with muscle memory. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, I just walked. Without realizing it I was back on Seventy-third Street. In front of me I saw a figure that looked familiar.

At the corner of Columbus, when the light turned green, the other Jeff began to cross the street. I followed as if in a trance. Near the end of the block, he skipped up the

steps to a brownstone. A few seconds later I looked up and saw him, in a window, looking down. Behind him I could see furniture that I also owned.

I glanced down at my watch. It showed 12:00 P.M. and I thought it was screwed up the same way it had been for the past couple of weeks, flashing twelve o'clock all the time. But as I stared it became 12:01. I kept staring until it turned to 12:02. I looked up again to the apartment and didn't recognize anything: the furniture, the blinds, the figure—a woman—staring down at me. Across the street I caught the eye of the doorman from the Wakefield but there was no glimmer of recognition. Looking up and down the street I saw door after door. There was silence but it felt like that was going to change. I waited a few more seconds before I left, heading home.