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Works on Paper

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

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in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Gallagher M. Lawson

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The Thesis of Gallagher M. Lawson is approved:

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## **PART ONE: MAIKO**

### **CHAPTER 1**

Around midnight the last motorbus pulled into the station. The one passenger who boarded was a young man made of papier mache. He wore a slate gray suit with a butterscotch tie and felt hat; his jacket sleeves hid his segmented fingers that carried a cardboard valise and an accounting ledger. Other than the driver, busy inspecting his teeth in the rearview mirror, no one else was inside. The young man chose a window seat near the back and immediately pulled the curtains shut.

As the motorbus roared its engine and departed down the single-lane highway, the young man began to feel sick. The dry inland wind blew through a cracked window near the front and flung his hat to the floor. He closed his eyes again. It should have been a relief to be on his way, but his mouth was parched and he thought any moment he would vomit. The shredded-paper soup he had eaten earlier churned inside him.

For nearly two hours the motorbus continued along the highway. The next station was an even smaller town, where two passengers who boarded reeked of lemons and laurel. They sat two rows behind him, and as they settled, their citrus odor made the young man feel worse. He pressed his jacket sleeve to his painted lips until the wave of nausea passed. The other passengers whispered while the wind whistled through the cracked window. In his valise, he removed a knitted scarf and left his accounting ledger in its place. The scarf he bunched up and tried to use as a cushion, leaning his head against the window. It wasn't very comfortable, but he was extremely tired and the rhythm of the road eventually lulled him to sleep.

Several times throughout the night other passengers boarded, and in his half-dream state, the young man—named Michael—observed shadows finding empty seats and settling in. In the dark, he felt safe from being singled out. At one stop a man chose the seat next to him, but within a few minutes his shaggy head was propped on Michael's shoulder. Michael didn't want to bring attention to himself, and so he stuffed the knitted scarf between his shoulder and the man's head and accepted his new role as a pillow.

At dawn, the motorbus stopped along the highway at an inspection point. Three men wearing uniforms boarded. In the dim morning light their oiled boots gleamed, and with each step they took the bus tilted to the left and then to the right. The men used flashlights to illuminate the faces of the sleepy passengers.

“What do they want?”

Michael said this to the stranger beside him. After the night's sleeping arrangements, it felt odd, almost improper, to finally speak after that intimacy.

"Never had an inspection on this route before," the man said. He had large hands that gripped the armrests between the seats. "Maybe they're looking for someone."

"Who?" Michael asked. He tried to get a better view of what was happening at the front.

The man shrugged. He yawned and clouded their small space with his sour breath. The uniformed men continued walking in synchronized steps down the main aisle, to the left and to the right, painting each row of passengers with their beams of light.

One of the uniformed men stopped before their row and inhaled deeply. Michael looked straight ahead. If it had been possible, he would have started sweating.

"Open your suitcase," the uniformed man said.

There must be a mistake, Michael wanted to say. But he had no time to explain—the uniformed man had already reached between his legs and plucked his cardboard valise from under the seat.

The two other inspectors looked on as the uniformed man undid the latches and shuffled through the contents. Michael stood to block the morning sunlight seeping through the curtains. He didn't need them to notice his unusual appearance.

The uniformed man's fingers ravished the clothes and papers inside the valise while Michael's own fingers trembled—he desperately wanted to snatch his belongings and stow them away—but he was the stranger here. He had to comply.

"What's this?" The uniformed man held up several bloated socks.

This couldn't be happening. His brothers, Michael realized, had called these men. Somehow, not even several hours after he had left, they had discovered what he had taken and called the inspection point to stop him. He opened his mouth to speak, but there was no story, no excuse that would get him out of this.

The uniformed man shook out the contents of one of the socks. Into his palm, strapped by a blue rubber band, plopped a bundle of cash.

"Why hello," Michael's neighbor said to the valise. He leaned closer to get a better look. From his grinning mouth another puff of morning breath filled the air.

Michael pressed his jacket sleeve to his lips again. The nausea was back.

This was all the other inspectors needed to continue exploring the case. One of them sniffed the valise, then reached in and withdrew Michael's ledger. He flipped through a few pages before glancing at Michael, who was now bracing himself for the worst. The inspector splayed the ledger to pages with crude drawings of Leo, Michael's brother, choking on a scorpion tail.

Before he could help it, Michael's hands went into action and snapped the ledger book shut and pressed it tight against his stomach. The inspectors ignored him, but he still tried his best to stop shaking and stand his ground, to make himself an imposing silhouette against the window.

Two stowaway silverfish crept out of the valise, dropped to the floor, and scurried away. No one seemed to notice this except for Michael, who accepted the valise back from the uniformed man. The other inspectors began sniffing again, inhaling deeply, and continued down the main aisle of the bus.

“Wrong guy,” the neighbor said to Michael. “This time.” He laughed and slapped his legs with his large hands.

Two rows back, a woman from the first stop leaped up as the inspectors lunged at her and searched her bags. Michael pulled the curtain to block the light leaking in, but it was pointless—the sun had risen and daylight had taken over the outside. He wanted nothing more than to still be in darkness. He glanced back—the woman was holding her face in her hands while the uniformed men revealed several pillowcases inside her luggage. They were full of lemons and laurel leaves, all of which were confiscated before the bus was allowed to move on.

In the next town, a mass of people joined the journey. The first half of the group, with the scents of diesel and dirt, took the remaining rows; the last group filled in any empty seats. Michael held his breath when an older woman took the seat across the aisle, spread out a large knit blanket, smelling of camphor, and fell asleep. He was still shaken from the inspectors violating his valise. He had never felt so constricted in his life. He exhaled slowly, and to avoid any interactions, pretended he was falling asleep.

He was kept awake by continually imagining the scene he feared most: the man or the woman next to him turning, seeing him, their eyes widening, unable to stop staring, and then the viewer feeling the right to ask: Where did you come from? Why are you alone? How old are you? And then, they would ask the key question: What happened to you? He pressed himself against the curtain until it undulated around his head, allowing him to sink in as if it were the skirt of an aunt or grandmother.

Surrounded by people, his body locked up. He was afraid to move. He didn't want to invade anyone's space, but by staying still, they were taking all the free space around him; even the space to breathe felt occupied. The man next to him had claimed the arm rest between them, and now Michael was clinging to the curtain—if it wouldn't have been obvious, he would have tossed the fabric completely over his head to burrow inside its darkness.

Not long after the bus was full, the man next to him, now awake, began to ask the basic questions politeness required. Michael mumbled a few responses, hoping to end the conversation, but soon realized that the man really didn't want to converse; he only wanted to tell a story, and so Michael took on his familiar role as a listener.

He spoke to Michael about his travels east to his father's funeral, and how the plot he had selected for the grave turned out to have another coffin already inside it. When he was informed of this by the funeral home's office, the man had shattered one of the vases filled with flowers. They had tried to calm him by offering him a cigarette, but this only made things worse, because the man could not stand the smell of cigarette smoke.

The man turned and asked, "What would you have done in my position?"

This was when it became apparent that the man only had one eye. How had Michael not noticed this before? Covering the man's right eye was a white patch that curved like the shell of an egg, held in place by an elastic band disappearing into his shaggy mass of hair. Michael had the advantage of a face that showed little emotion, and

hiding in the shadow of the curtain, his surprise didn't surface. The one-eyed man stared at Michael, his look full of sincere patience, waiting for validation that his behavior had been acceptable.

"I wouldn't know what to do," Michael said. He clenched his feet around his cardboard valise.

The man then retold how, at the funeral home, he proceeded to destroy everything he could get his hands on. Michael imagined those large hands before him snapping the stems of calla lilies. The man smiled as he said that the final blow was when he tossed a plaque with an engraved prayer through the office's large front window, and that the shattering glass was the most liberating sound he had ever heard.

While the man spoke, Michael realized something. Here was someone who also looked different, and yet he was completely comfortable talking with a stranger. He even seemed to disregard his difference, or possibly even flaunt it, by highlighting it with a bright, white patch.

"I'll be glad to get home," the man said. He lived in the city by the sea, where the bus was headed. As he leaned back, he turned. The patched eye faced Michael again.

"And where are you from?"

His last word was accompanied by a fleck of spittle that landed on Michael's face. Michael unobtrusively wiped it off with his coat sleeve. Any moisture that sat on his skin for too long was always a problem.

"I'm from the inland," Michael said. He cleared his throat. It felt as if he had not spoken in days. "But I'm on my way to the city by the sea, too."

“Inlanders are always coming to the city. You know that some of the neighborhoods don’t want to allow new people in? Among other issues. They’re trying to pass it as a law, or if that fails they’re threatening to secede and start their own city.”

“That doesn’t seem very fair,” Michael said.

“At least you have enough money for the entry fee. But you’ll still have to complete an entry form.”

“What entry form?”

The man laughed. The people in the row in front of them grunted as they struggled to fall back asleep.

“I have money,” Michael said, motioning to his valise. The man leaned over to get a better look with his good eye.

“You know, at the north end of the city is a lighthouse, and they say if you plant paper money below it, the money grows a tree. Of course as soon as people see the money, fresh as fruit, they pick it off. That’s why there are so many bare trees up there.”

Michael wasn’t paying attention. The possibility had never occurred to him that he would not be permitted entry to the city. What would he do then? He couldn’t go back. This news prompted him to sit up, and the curtain shifted and splashed sunlight onto his expressionless face.

The man’s one eye widened. His lip curled as he finally recognized something was different. “Do all inlanders look like you?”

If Michael had real skin, he would have blushed. He would have given away that he didn’t like talking about his appearance, or being singled out as representative of

inlanders—a term he hated and hoped to leave behind. If he had real skin he wouldn't need to say a single word to explain all of this—it would all have been said through his body. But he didn't.

“I don't look like them, and they don't look like me,” Michael said. The man continued to stare. This confused Michael—after all, the man himself sported an eye patch, so why would he stare as though he didn't understand? Michael pulled the curtain to hide himself again in the shade.

“There was an accident. I didn't always look this way.”

“So what happened?” The man raised his hand to touch Michael's face, but the approaching hand reminded Michael of the uniformed man who had reached for his valise. Michael flung himself forward, covering the gap to the floor. He felt trapped in his small seat, pressed against the inside wall and curtain of the bus.

The man's hand reached forward again. Cornered, Michael heard himself lash out.

“And what happened to your eye? You did all that damage at the funeral office, but what did they do to you? Did they poke your eye out?”

The man's skin rippled with rage, something Michael wished he could do. Inside was a distant building of some feeling; it may have been fear.

“Or maybe you're wearing a patch for the fun of it? That's certainly why I look this way. Just to be different.” His own voice was trembling. He hated himself when that happened. He identified the feeling inside—he felt sick again and completely vulnerable. His nostrils picked up the increasing stench of camphor.

“Excuse me!” The woman who had been sleeping next to them was now awake, grimacing. A few others in the rows around them turned, including the woman who had her lemons taken away. Michael shriveled from all the attention. The woman continued: “How dare a boy talk like that to someone older than him. You should respect elders.”

“I’m not a boy,” Michael said. Of course to anyone else he appeared as an adolescent, but he was older than that.

The man with one eye squirmed in his chair, his large hands gripping both arm rests. Michael wasn’t certain if the man was moving for better access to his neck, to strangle him like the flowers he said he had crushed. But just then the bus stopped for the first time in over an hour.

The man stood.

“Try not to fall asleep.”

He shoved off. The older woman rose slowly, giving Michael a final disapproving stare, and walked away with the others.

## **CHAPTER 2**

Once most of the passengers were outside, Michael installed himself and his cardboard valise in the last row of seats. Sometimes, moving slowly, he appeared very graceful when he moved, almost like a leaf, as he sometimes thought of himself, floating on the surface of a lake. This was not one of those times. When he was in a hurry, as he was now, his movements were jerky and disjointed, as though he would break into pieces. Before anyone returned from the break he opened a stray newspaper left on the seat and held it up to hide his head from view. An article on emerging artists in the city caught his attention, until he began to feel tired. He really did not get much sleep the night before. The bus had been uncomfortable and his neighbors loud. He couldn't fall asleep now, though. Not after the threat from the one-eyed man.

Later, as the motorbus continued on the highway, Michael lowered the newspaper to inspect the rows of heads before him. He tried to find the man with one eye, but couldn't tell which head was his. All of the passengers appeared to have changed seats or clothes. Several seats were empty; the last stop must have been some passengers' destination. He rested his head against the curtain—this one thinner and unable to block

as much light. Outside the window covered in dusty fingermarks, the painted stripe along the road sped by, while further out the bushes and the mountains slowly rolled away. The rhythm of the road continued to make Michael sleepy; several times he dozed off, each time waking to the worry that he'd find the one-eyed man beside him. Outside, more and more houses appeared and thick trees grew closer to the highway as they neared the coast.

From his valise he pulled out his ledger and began to draw the face of the one-eyed man. Michael's hands were clumsy, and most of his drawings, made to relax himself or release any feelings he did not recognize, a habit that had turned into instinct, would have appeared to be made by a child. He drew and exaggerated whatever he saw. Sketching the man, Michael added—instead of an eye patch—a large egg lodged in the man's face.

As the sparse shrubs and peaks of mountain sediment were swept away from view, and an occasional insect splattered on the glass, Michael continued to feel ill. He was really on his way, he told himself, and wasn't going to be sent back. He'd long had doubts about the trip, and half expected that within the first day he would be caught. The appearance of houses along the highway, though, signaled they were getting close to the city. A few months before, the tenth anniversary of his accident, he had overheard his brothers mentioned the city by the sea, and how it was full of odd-looking people—'freaks' was the word they had used—and how no one seemed to care that they were there. A simple plan then formed: take his brothers' money and run away to live by the sea. He had known it was the only thing he could do to stay alive. There had been no

danger of him physically dying—if anything, he had been overly protected at home. But that was no life for him. A young man cannot stay in one place when the only option each morning is the same day. Despite the scare at the inspection point, now he was on his way, watching the world he knew speed away, while he sketched the inside world of the bus. The sickness returned, though, as he thought of the one-eyed man’s questions and his enormous hands that had reached for Michael’s face. It was a feeling he had thought could be left behind, but now that it had already surfaced, he was afraid it would stay there, encasing him for all future encounters with strangers.

He finally gave in and tented the newspaper over his face and closed his eyes.

By evening the motorbus descended the highway through the mountains, revealing the first glimpse of the city by the sea. Instantly Michael’s feelings of sickness faded and he felt as light as a paper airplane. Jutting out on a thin peninsula was the city, surrounded by a harbor on one side and the vast ocean on the other. Several highways and train tracks crossed the waters and connected the mainland to the north and east of the peninsula, where the city emerged, glittering in the setting sun. Tall buildings with impenetrable glass huddled in the upper half. *What was inside each of them*, he wondered. Behind them, the northern coast was a sharply rising hill with a cliff that faced the ocean, covered by a canopy of trees. In the middle of the trees stood a small lighthouse, overlooking the ships entering and leaving the harbor. Were those the money trees the man had spoken of? Michael took a deep breath, imagining the scent of salt

water and secrets buried deep in the ocean. He was no longer an inlander. He would be an urban dweller.

Just as he was imagining his new home, a restless woman in the row before his passed him a slip of paper.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“The entry form. Do you need a pen?”

He shook his head. It was indeed an entry form, with blank spaces to declare items and to state the intent for entering the city. What would he write? He saw the other passengers scribbling their responses, but as the bus exited the highway Michael dropped his form—he was too focused now on every sight in the city. They passed billboards, telephone poles towering over apartment buildings, and warehouses with no windows.

Then, as the highway offramp curved and Michael’s anticipation grew for the city at street level, it was from this angle that he could see ahead in the road lay a slumped body with sickly green skin.

“Look out!” he shouted. The heads in front of him turned in unison. For a moment he was frightened—now they would all be against him for disrupting their writing.

But then he was thrown forward. The bus skidded and swerved to the right. The wheels moaned louder than any dying animal he had heard inland. The bus slammed against a cement wall—a moment later something broke, a heavy sound of metal separating from metal, and the bus fell forward. Suitcases pinwheeled down the aisle and bags from the storage shelves above plopped like falling fruit. Passengers on the left were flung to the right, screaming, salmon-pink mouths gaping.

As Michael plunged through the air toward the front of the bus, along with the suitcases and bags and newspapers from other passengers, he was surprised to find he could see everything very distinctly at once: he saw a stray lemon tumbling down the aisle, he saw a series of hats and scarves climb over seats; he saw, through the windows, the green body in the road that lay motionless, and at the same time he saw the other side of the canal that the bus had fallen into, and that the bus was teetering on the cement wall that divided the street from the sewer; and he saw himself, in mid-air, somersaulting, snagging his blazer on one of the armrests, feeling a sharp tear in his body; and then he saw himself falling slowly, past the two stowaway silverfish, and it seemed to him that he could possibly die, if not by smashing into the glass at the front of the bus, then at the moment when the bus would finally fall into the canal and be swept away by the waters. At that moment a sadness, a heavy feeling of regret, sank with him to the ground, as he understood that just when he thought his new life was beginning it was already over.

A blast of humid air entered the bus.

An overzealous young man with a barking voice had opened a side window as an emergency exit and commanded that everyone waste no time and climb out. Michael, though, lay on the ground, watching this exodus, numb, trying to make sense, inhaling the new smell of the open sea that seeped in. Then he detected another scent. Someone, out of fright, must have urinated—for soaking into his scalp was a trail of liquid that started several rows back, and because of the angle of the bus, entered into his hair. He leaped up and immediately dried himself on one of the vinyl seat covers. Liquids were the most dangerous substances; he had to avoid them at all costs.

Next, he needed to locate his cardboard valise. He raised his hands to explore his head and ensure there were no soft dents caused by the urine, but felt something else was different about his body.

His left arm was missing.

It should have registered as a bigger problem that he was missing part of his body. However, the commotion and the increasing urgency to escape gave him little time to pause. The remaining passengers scrambled to the emergency exit, and out into the salty air. The bus lurched forward again and those inside cried for help.

With one arm, Michael searched under the seats. He found his valise toward the front. Because he was so light, his own body weight didn't tip the bus forward as he wandered up and down the aisle. Beneath the old woman's wool blanket, still smelling of camphor, he located his missing arm. Some stout person must have stepped on his fingers, for they were smashed flat. Once, years ago, he had lost this same arm, trying to help his brothers move bags of coffee beans. The bags had been too heavy and his arm simply came undone at the shoulder. He had to wait until his father returned home from his job as an art teacher to reattach the limb. There had been no pain, as now, except for the embarrassment that he was weaker and more limited than his younger brothers.

He clumsily dragged the arm and valise to the emergency exit, only to discover he could not lift himself up. He was the last one inside. Through the front glass of the bus, he could see the swift muddy waters in the canal.

A shadow from above fell over his face.

"It's true, then. Inlanders like to stay on the inside," said the man with one eye.

Michael froze. His first instinct was to laugh. Of course what he had said earlier to the man was only a joke. He hadn't meant to upset him. Couldn't they put that behind them and start over?

The man put out his large hand, the same one that had tried to touch Michael's face.

"Give me your suitcase first."

Michael hesitated.

"Give me the suitcase first, and then we'll pull you out. Hurry up, now. This bus is going to fall in."

Michael raised the valise with his good hand and the one-eyed man grabbed the handle.

"Thank you," Michael said. He was learning a valuable lesson now that he was on his own. He told himself not to be quick to judge others, and was thankful that the man was forgetting what had happened. "Can you take this as well?" He held up the broken-off limb, embarrassed to look the man in his one eye.

The metal of the bus creaked again as it started to lean further.

"Hello?"

The man was gone.

### **CHAPTER 3**

Michael waved his detached arm like a flag outside the window and soon enough two clean-cut men pulled Michael out. As they put him down, they seemed confused as to how light he was, but didn't question him, and instead they ran off to join a crowd that had formed around the body in the street.

The man with the missing eye was nowhere to be seen, and Michael's valise was gone. It was as if another part of his body had broken off. There was too much going on around him, though, to think about this. He neared the crowd, wobbling past a few sweating passengers who lay on the ground, pressing cloths to cuts on their foreheads. When they pulled the cloths away, Michael saw flashes of bright blood. Blood always pained him, not because he was sensitive to it, but because he no longer bled like that.

The bus finally gave in to gravity and disappeared over the low cement wall. The passengers circling the body paused to watch it slide below the canal's trembling surface. Several fragile women continued to scream; a few ran away. Michael still did not see the man with the missing eye, but he did finally see, up close, the body.

It was a nude girl tangled in her own hair. But not just any hair—it was made of tentacles of seaweed, beaded with floats. Striped across her neck was a triple set of slits, or gills like a fish, crusted with dried seafoam. Her skull had been crushed and the bones in her face poked through the scaly green skin, already dry and flaky, that covered her entire body. One of her long arms held a rusty knife in webbed fingers. The large fin that extended in place of legs was severed down the middle with a canyon of dried blood. Her bluish lips were parted and exposed two sets of small, serrated teeth. The stench of a dead sea creature overpowered the lingering smell of gasoline from the bus. An elastic cloud of flies surrounding the body buzzed up, only to bounce back and attach themselves to the seaweed hair and exposed wound.

“A dead mermaid,” Michael said.

“She was dead before we got here,” a woman with frizzy red hair said. In the moist air her hair had expanded as if she had been electrocuted. She put her hand out to touch the body, but pulled back when a pair of mating flies landed on her palm.

“I didn’t run over her,” the bus driver, a hale man whose eyes bulged, said. “I couldn’t tell if she was alive so I swerved out of the way.”

“Has anyone seen a man with an eye patch?” Michael asked.

The others ignored him. They were too interested in the dead mermaid. Michael was relieved for once there was a spectacle more interesting than him. He had always wanted to blend in, and in the moment he needed to stand out, his woes were no comparison to a dead mermaid. They were experiencing a collective break in space, and

for a moment he wasn't sure if what had happened was real. He touched his face and stroked his ears.

A moment later, several police jeeps arrived with flashing lights. The officers set up zebra-striped barriers around the body and covered it with a black tarp. Littered around everyone were their entry forms, flopping on the pavement like gasping fish. Soon an ambulance arrived and passengers began arguing over who would get a ride to the hospital.

Michael stood back from all of this. He didn't know what to do. The heaviness of sleep overtook him. He knew he should have been wild with anger, or perhaps fear, to have survived such an accident, but he could only observe his situation as if from a great distance. The sky was turning to evening—a brilliant, abstract watercolor of pinks and blues, like nothing he had ever seen inland. In a way, the accident had served a purpose: he was now free from his past by losing all of his belongings. As he watched the police struggle to write with dull pencils what passengers were saying, he longed for his own ledger book. They never glanced over at him, and so he decided they didn't need him—there was no one here to ask for his entry form—and he walked away.

The exit offramp led to a road that connected to a main street. There, buses and taxis sped beside cars and bicyclists. The street was lined with tall buildings, many starting to turn on their lights as the sky shifted to darker tones. Michael stuffed his detached arm in his jacket sleeve and used his good hand to hold it in place by clasping

the elbow. When he passed a stoplight, he noticed a flyer that said: SPLIT THIS CITY IN TWO!

He joined a loose crowd of restless pedestrians and strolled as if he had always lived here. Michael had told no one at home he was leaving. His brothers, Leo and Ralph, had left the house to deliver their coffee beans in town, and their father was already at the high school where he taught. His younger brothers had turned their backyard into a coffee farm, and were now selling their coffee to local coffeeshops and grocery stores. Michael was their bookkeeper, and the day before, after counting the bags they had taken away, he updated their accounting books, went into his bedroom and packed his cardboard valise with a few belongings, two socks stuffed with money, and some clothing. He wore his one suit and walked their long driveway, past the apiaries and sycamore trees, down to the bus stop.

His brothers knew nothing about bookkeeping, and for the past several months Michael had used an account he had created, called Offsets, where he had placed small amounts for himself.

He hated his life inland. Ever since the accident his life had become stagnant, and before he knew it, ten years had passed, and his younger brothers were bigger than him; although he felt like an adult, he was stuck with the same fifteen-year-old body. He had little control over his life. His family was constantly worried he would injure himself or get swept away by the strong inland winds. They never let him go outside unless he had something heavy with him, like a metal chain, to hold him in place. But after ten years as a kind of pet, he was on his own, and there was no way to stop him. They would never

know he had to come to the city. They might think the wind took him away; they might search the fields and inspect the scarecrows for evidence of Michael's body. But they would find nothing. He didn't even leave a note—he didn't want to waste the paper.

Like his disconnected arm, he was now a disconnected traveler. No one knew he was here, and he could be anyone now. Not even the city had a record of him arriving. The one thing that acknowledged him was a crow that yelled at him from a tree. He wandered the streets of the city and thought about the new life he would start. He had imagined living in an apartment that overlooked the ocean, watching the ships enter the harbor and watching the pedestrians move like ants on the sidewalk. Here he was, one of the ants, someone unknown in the buildings above watching him. He looked up, searching for that window with a light, the hope that he could one day be up there.

Instead, he was hit in the eye.

It began to rain.

## **CHAPTER 4**

The other pedestrians had been prepared. They popped open their parasols, which had been conveniently stowed inside their bags, strapped to their belt buckles, or in their hands. Strangely, everyone had the same style: a short, wooden handle with black fabric for the canopy. A few unprepared men loosely tented newspapers over their heads and dashed for cover. A stocky woman lowered the hood of her stroller and tightened the blankets around a baby. The only parts of the baby that could be seen were its hands, in motion like little pincers. Michael felt as helpless as the child. Small nomadic groups of hooded people were headed in all directions—he had no sense which was the best place for shelter. Some headed indoors, some huddled beside a bus stop, which had a small overhang only large enough to cover a bench that could seat three. He stepped into the crosswalk and tried to duck under other people's umbrellas. Underneath them, the stiff faces of the umbrella owners glared at him, recoiled, and hurried on.

Michael was surprised. It was summer time. Weren't the rainstorms over in the spring? But then he realized he was assuming the rest of the world was like the inland where he was from. The inland: known for hot, dry summers, and wet winters and

springs. The city by the sea had its own climate, and he was terrified that he had not thought of this before.

Every minute the rain seemed to transform. It started as fat sporadic drops of water, splashing dark dots on the sidewalk and pavement. Then a wind blew in from the sea and shifted the drops to assault people and buildings horizontally. And then the drops turned into drizzle, finally settling on a steady shower. The rain felt warmer than the surrounding air. The clash of temperatures made the streets muggy. The wind picked up and set flight to loose leaves of newspaper across the street, as the wheels of cars mirrored the wind, tossing beads of water from their tires, like moving sprinkler heads. A few taxis honked and bus brakes squeaked. In the distance he saw a small traffic jam at an intersection. A man, his mustache dripping with rain, was yelling at a driver. He stood waving his deflated umbrella and spoke in a language that Michael did not recognize.

The gray cloud cover muted the colors of everything—except the blue trash cans on street corners, which seemed like columns of topaz; gray glass and gray walls; gray pavement, tinged with the swirling rainbow and starbursts of oil slicks, and the rolling water that stretched down the gutters like gray tentacles.

Michael grabbed a newspaper from the bus stop and tented it over his head. A new learned behavior. He was briefly excited for this innovation he had acquired. His jacket and shirt were damp. His detached arm: snug in its sleeve. Water was something he had learned to avoid over the years. Whenever it rained inland, it always gave a clear sign—the clouds would collect and darken in one spot of the sky, or they could be seen migrating from a distance, rolling forward like sheep. Here, it was as if the sky had

suddenly given in to the weight of the water. Like nature's accounting: the credit of water in the air had transferred to the debit column of raindrops.

The street he was on ran north to south. To the north, he could see the hill with trees and the luminous lighthouse behind them. After that, he guessed, was the mouth of the harbor. Behind him, to the south, were the highway and the bus accident. He had no plan to return. He had no entry form, no luggage, no money. But those things didn't matter right now. What he needed was to get out of the rain.

He followed a few soaking people to a teahouse. Too late—the teahouse was packed, and the wet pedestrians who were pressed against the window steamed up the glass, something his body would not do. A crowd indoors seemed like a place where he could have blended in and waited out the storm. Michael reached for the handle of the door anyway, but a crinkle-nosed waitress saw him. She shook her head. He didn't want to bring attention to himself, so he waited.

“Please,” he finally said. He knocked on the glass. “Please let me in for a minute.”

She pasted a sign in the window: **RESTROOM FOR CUSTOMERS ONLY.**

He wanted to laugh. How funny that she would think he wanted to expel things from his body, when all he was trying to do was keep his body intact. A feeling of unreality was all around him and getting inside him. He stepped away.

Around a corner he passed the display window of a department store. The lights clicked off as he walked by. He scurried ahead to the entrance, where a few customers ran out into the rain. A young, moon-faced girl stepped in a puddle that splashed onto her socks. She screamed—a mix of shock and delight. A new sensation, around his neck,

extended to his waist. When he peered inside his jacket, a river of ink and paint that started at his neck began to trickle down his torso. He was losing his color. A taxi pulled up and she and her slender mother climbed in. As she was shutting the door, the girl paused and stared at Michael. Her eyes were large like goggles. She pointed and Michael turned away, embarrassed. If he could have, he would have blushed. While adults were too absorbed in their own lives and situations, children were always the first to notice when something or someone wasn't right. He looked again to see the mother's tapering arm around the girl's shoulder, drawing her in, and then she slammed the taxi door. He realized he must look like a monster to them, falling apart in the rain.

He tried the door of the department store. Locked. This time when he let go of his detached arm, it fell out of his jacket sleeve. He stuffed it back inside. Did bad weather always shut down the city? He didn't understand why everything was closed or full. It had been so long since he'd been in a city, he didn't know the protocol. If only he'd had more time to learn it. Why did it have to rain his first day here? He leaned against the building next to him, but there was no cover above, and each minute he felt his body grow heavier—liquid seeping inside his paper skin.

The rain was relentless now, seemingly angry that an intruder had entered the city. Hardly anyone was on the street. A bus pulled to its stop across the way and a small shivering crowd boarded. Michael ran over, and the water that his feet kicked up soaked into his legs.

“Please, I need to board, but I don't have any money,” Michael said to the bus driver.

“Get lost!” The driver, an old, bloated man scoffed and waved him off. Michael stood back as the bus drove away. The wheels sloshed a wave of water that burst against Michael’s legs. The new passengers settled into their seats and steamed the windows as they immediately began to dry off. He thought about the comfort of the motorbus he had been in earlier that day. And now look where he was. Behind him, on the bench and under the awning, a fidgeting man with an open, saffron-colored mouth was trying to curl up.

“May I please sit down?” Michael asked.

“Find your own bench,” the man said, exposing his gapped teeth and releasing foul-smelling breath.

The sunlight faded from the sky; darkness filled the city. The rain felt like sharp teeth. Michael dragged himself away and headed down another street, where the rainfall became refreshingly light. He looked up. Another drop in his eye. Perhaps this was how the one-eyed man had become blinded—he had looked into the sky and something had fallen, something as simple as a raindrop, but with just the right composition to take away his sight.

His detached arm felt like putty in his other hand. Michael started to run; spotting an alley ahead that he hoped could provide cover. There he located a dumpster, and for a moment he recognized the fact that he was willing to hide inside it. Had his life already come to this? But the lid was locked. His feet had become heavy, like bricks that he had to drag. A man in an elegant trench coat passed the alley, and Michael put out his good

hand, already bent in a pose familiar to beggars. There had to be one person who would help.

“Please, do you have any cover?” he mumbled, but the man casually curved away from him without stopping.

Was this really happening? Was he falling to pieces? Could he hold up much longer?

He felt strangely at ease. It confirmed what he figured would happen: just to make it to the city seemed like enough of an accomplishment. Perhaps that was all he was meant for. Or perhaps all along he had made a terrible mistake. He thought about the rare times it rained inland. How was it possible, he wondered, to be awake and aware of his body disintegrating before his own eyes? Inland he had watched the rain coat the coffee bushes and form the small streams that flowed between them, never afraid of the rain because he was always inside, safe behind the glass of a window. Two contrasting worlds connected by clear material.

Here there was no glass.

An army of umbrellas marched past him and disappeared around the corner. There were no trees on this street. No awnings, no covers, nothing. The only trees visible were north, on the hill, too far away. There would be nothing left of him by then. And so he headed south, past the locked doors and occupied benches, where further along the street Michael finally found hope: a large bridge that scalloped across the city skyline. He used a building wall to support himself, but then saw that he was smearing a streak of black ink across the stucco. His painted fingernails were gone; he now had white tips for

fingers—it was as if he was seeing the bone. His legs had become as heavy as bags of coffee beans. Yet a voice inside remained optimistic: a few more steps...

It was an extreme effort to make it across the street. The water was ankle deep, and his feet became heavier with each step. The water seeped up his legs. He was absorbing it fast. He rushed to the bridge. To avoid a large puddle he had to go back a half block to find a spot where he could cross onto the sidewalk. Then he ran toward the bridge, past discarded wrappers of trash and bones of dead fish that had been glued to the uneven pavement and were now being loosened and were floating away.

Under the bridge he was breathing heavily. He loosened his tie and squeezed out some water, but his body was too heavy. He fell to his knees on the curb and had to steady himself. It might be too late. The water was inside him, and his body was acting like a sponge. His detached arm fell out of his sleeve again. He gave in to the weight and lay on the sidewalk and gulped large breaths of salty air. Above him several rats and a flock of pigeons huddled near the stone arches.

Just then the headlights of a bus materialized through the curtain of rain, roared along under the bridge, and splashed a large puddle that had formed in the gutter and spread into the street. It coated him with slime and debris and shoved him to the ground. He vomited water. As he leaned over, in the small puddle forming before him, he saw the reflected outline of his face—it was not a shape he recognized.

He was not even trying to find help now; he had given up. This was what the voice inside told him, that he was trying to lose himself now, but he wasn't sure if he could trust the voice. He had the ability to trick his mind like that. Body and mind had

been separated for ten years now, so it was an easy way to deal with problems. But a problem like this? He thought he might be able to step out of his body and feel so light that he could fly like a pigeon in the rain. The drops would roll off his wings and he would find that apartment in the high rise he was meant to live in, and below he would see the mash of pulp and pile of clothes he had once been. He would only need to splatter open the spot inside himself that would liberate those qualities capable of transforming him.

He lay on the ground. He was dying, he was certain of it, and turning into pulp. The rats and pigeons watched with their small, dark eyes. One of the rats broke from the group and ran across his legs, sniffing like the uniformed inspectors on the bus. Then, emerging from the mist that shrouded the bridge, a pair of thin human legs approached. Someone had been out in the storm longer than him and was walking under the bridge. No one here would help him, he had decided, so he thought it best to blend in with the surroundings and let the pedestrian on his way.

He didn't have the strength to move. The pedestrian would have to either step over him or—more likely—on him. His mouth opened. Upon closer inspection, the person approaching was wearing high heels. Above, she had a strangely shaped head—but then he realized she was covering herself with some kind of square or panel. The panel was removed and lowered towards him, and revealed the normal shape of a woman's head. Then he felt softness—fur—as it was brushed across him in gentle strokes.

She was doing him a favor. He was sure of it. She was going to suffocate him and put him out of his misery. He wanted to say thank you, but his mouth would not close for him to speak. The fur moved across his face; he coughed once, and realized he had stopped breathing. A moment later, he closed his eyes.

## **CHAPTER 5**

He found himself on a kitchen table, wrapped in a mantle of fur, staring at a ceiling covered with brown blossoms of water stains. The fur beneath him slipped off the table when he sat up, as if it belonged to an animal that had unzipped its skin. So she had not suffocated him—the fur had been used to dry him. He listened to what he thought was his heart beating, but then discovered it was a steady stream of drops into a body of water. Behind a thin curtain drawn across one side of the room was another room, filled with rainwater, which fanned in time with the steady dripping. To his right, on the stove, sat a baking pan holding his detached arm.

His skin felt like a crisp shell surrounding a softer inside. Touching his face and neck, he found most of his body had dried out. How much damage had been done, though? He stood up and learned that his feet were soft; he could not stand without holding on to the dining chair.

A narrow hall led to a bathroom, its wall displaying several framed photographs. One was a family photo, a father and mother with two girls, but the rest were of a woman, probably the one who had rescued him. Some were fashion pictures, some were

travel photographs, and a few were blurry self portraits. In the dim light he tried to make out her features.

The photos reminded Michael of his own home. He had lived in a former elementary school, and his father had decorated the long hallway that connected all the classrooms to the former office—now their living room—with drawings, paintings, and photographs. Most of his father's art was the subject of the changes over time of his sons, so every time Michael had walked down that hall, he passed pictures of himself from the time he was a baby to the young man he was now. While his brothers continued to age and grow bigger in the photographs, Michael stayed the same. There were pictures of his mother too, but those stopped early on, for she had died when the boys were young. What had always struck Michael was the shift in media—when they were teenagers, his father had switched from paintings and drawings to black and white photography.

Inside the bathroom, Michael stood before the small mirror, bracing himself against a rather small sink. The room itself seemed like a miniature version of most bathrooms he had seen. The toilet was extremely low to the ground and had a small tank. Next to it sat a tub, long enough only for a short person to lay fully extended. A moment passed as he listened to the pipes gurgle inside the walls—a groan, almost like a wail. Then, with a single motion he flipped the light switch.

The lightbulb did not blast an immediate brightness as he had expected. Instead, it flickered several times like a strobe light, humming loudly, emitting a very dim glow. Over several minutes it brightened the room. At first it gave everything a milk chocolate overtone, and Michael could make out in the mirror, glaring back at him, was a sickly

man made of paper. He recognized himself and saw only small changes to his body. Along his face, still frozen in a bland, depressed look, the expression he commonly had each day, a faint line ran down his forehead and faded near his nose. His yarn hair framed his face, but instead of being parted neatly to the side, it was a curly mass.

When the light was at its fullest, an antiseptic brightness that could burn any mold or soft-shelled insect, the details became clear of how much damage had been done. To look at his full face was too intense. As he turned to one side, he noticed that half of his face was smudged and dented, as if a violent act was emerging around his eye socket. The flesh-colored paint that made his skin had faded to a dusty rose, and in many spots was completely gone, so that he could see the newsprint underneath. It was like seeing muscle under the skin, pulpy sinew of smeared words from ten years ago. Along his neck were stains of black ink, let loose after having been sealed in for years. He was shocked but also thrilled to have some kind of change in his body. While most people could recover from an injury—a bruise or a cut always healed on its own—his body didn't know how to heal itself. In a frenzy, he removed his clothes and examined the rest of his body.

All of it was a close approximation of what he used to be. His elbow and knees: still pins between the segments of his arms and legs, except for the missing arm. He fingered his empty arm socket, expecting to feel some dull pain, or any sensation for that matter, but it didn't register. His paper coin nipples: gone. His belly button: caved in, leaving a gaping tunnel to his innards. His paper coin roll penis: still fully intact and

flaccid. He moved his hands along his body and skin: dents, more dents, and occasional soggy spots.

For a moment he imagined being sent home in a cardboard box, his father not even recognizing the pieces as his oldest son. He had a slightly perverse pleasure in seeing all the damage, feeling that it was all hopeless, that he wasn't made to survive the city. He wouldn't lament any of this. This was how his body would be for the rest of his life, for when he had been transformed into paper, it was permanent. There had never been any talk that he could go back. After ten years in a paper body, he had learned there was never any going back. The body was a capsule that, if protected, would last forever. And here he was, in a strange city, in a stranger's home, a strange creature himself that had just transformed into something hideous.

Seeing his body this way, half a person, he realized something he had never acknowledged: he hated himself. He wanted to cut his paper body into tiny pieces and die. He no longer wanted to be alive like this. To be made of paper was bad enough; to be made of deformed, defiled paper would be unbearable. He wanted to turn on the shower and sit under it in the tub that was too small for him, until he had melted away like a piece of soap.

During all this time the house had been silent. A phone began ringing, so loud it shook the toothbrush on the edge of the sink. He tried to ignore it and leaned closer to the mirror to inspect his scalp and the unraveling yarn that was his hair.

The phone rang again, each ring sounding more urgent. He realized he was naked, in a stranger's house, and attempted to dress as quickly as possible with one arm; meanwhile someone stormed down the hall to the kitchen. As he snapped open the bathroom door, the ringing cut off mid-trill.

In the kitchen stood the woman, her back to him, the phone held to her ear. Her hair was tied back and revealed her small ears.

"Only one room is flooded," she said in a hushed voice. "The same one every time it rains. Can you come tonight?"

On the kitchen floor, draped around the table, lay the fur cape. As a guest he felt responsible for keeping things tidy, and so he crept into the kitchen, and with his one hand, draped the fur back onto the tabletop. But as he did this, one corner snagged under the foot of a chair, which squealed in surprise. The woman reeled around and dropped the phone to the floor. She squeaked like a mouse.

Michael darted into the darkness of the hallway. The woman scrambled to untangle herself from the phone cord, and then held the receiver back to her ear. "It was nothing," she said. There was a long pause while she smoothed the hair around her forehead. Finally she added, "I saw a spider, that's all."

She spoke for a few minutes, negotiating a time for someone to look at the flooded room. Then she hung up, undid her bale of brown hair so that it cascaded over her shoulders, and stared at the fur on the table.

From the hallway, he waited a long time before he said: "I'm sorry if I frightened you."

She approached, and he walked further back, past the pictures to the bathroom.

“It’s all right. Come out,” she said. He paused in the doorway, and she stopped before him, a silhouette against the light from the kitchen. She stepped closer. She was young, with tired eyes, and had a small mole on her jawline like a mushroom. A moment later he noticed that he was touching his own face, feeling the dents around his eye socket and the torn edges of his cheek.

“How is it,” she began, then hesitated. She rubbed her temples as if she was trying to break loose the thoughts that were jammed in her head. “I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“I wasn’t always like this,” he said quickly.

“Will you be all right?”

“I don’t know,” he said. He didn’t want to talk about himself. “Who was on the phone?”

“The engineer. You’re not from the city, are you?”

“I just got here, from the inland. Today, actually.”

“What will you do now?”

“I’m here to start over,” he said. The city, as he understood it, was a place where one could be whoever he wanted to be. He was a blank slate, ready to try on new lives until he found one that fit.

“It’s not easy,” she said. “Just when you think things are fine, your life can change—like that.” She laughed so hard he thought she was laughing at him. She covered

her mouth, giggling: *Tee hee hee, tee hee hee*. When she recovered, she sighed and stared at the floor.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It’s just that today I lost my job, and I don’t know what I’ll do. All I think I can do is laugh at myself.” She looked at him until he turned away. “How old are you?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“Why, you can’t be older than fifteen.”

“I’m much older than that.” He bowed his head. “You’re not afraid of how I look?” he asked.

“Why should I be?” She smiled and he found this very comforting.

“I’ve fallen apart.”

Before he knew what was happening, she was touching his dented eye socket and brushing her fingers across his cheek. He tried to stay still, but it was the first time in years since someone had touched his face. He retreated into the doorway.

“I could fix you up,” she said.

“You’ve already done so much for me,” he said. He wanted to say more, that he thought he would have died today if she had not rescued him, but he couldn’t shape the words in his mouth. Besides, he had seen the damage and knew he could not go back to how he looked before.

“Don’t be silly. I’ll fix you up. Then you can go your way. But you don’t look the least bit prepared. Where are your belongings? Do you have any money?”

His head sank. What he missed most of all was his notebook.

“Someone stole my money. A one-eyed man.”

“Oh, that’s just terrible.” She stroked his yarn hair. His body was shaking, so she stopped. “Did he happen to have a white patch over one eye?”

“You know him?” A brief thrill ran through his body, that he could get his notebook and money back. Yet she only shrugged casually.

“He stops to watch me all the time, where I work. Well, used to work.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t,” she said. “You poor thing.”

He wanted to run away. He was tired of strangers reaching out to touch him and experience the feel of paper skin against their own flesh. But where could he go? Outside it was likely still raining.

As if to change the subject, she asked, “Are you hungry?”

He explained what he liked to eat: newspaper soaked in milk. This seemed to give her a new purpose. She went through the curtains that separated the kitchen from the drawing room, which was flooded, and climbed a set of stairs. He realized they were in a basement apartment, and the only window was at the top of the staircase. She returned with the evening edition of the City Mirror.

“Look at that,” she said, pointing to the front page. A photo of a crowd of people was below a headline that said DEAD MERMAID CAUSES ACCIDENT.

She used scissors that shined in the overhead light to chop up the newspaper. She shredded it into bits that she put into a bowl on the stove before adding a splash of goat’s

milk. For herself, she made a bowl of noodles with mushroom broth. Through the strands of her hair hanging over, her eyes blinked rapidly like a camera.

While they waited for the food to cool, they sat at the table, the fur mantle on its own chair like a pet. Underneath the table their stomachs growled like two whales singing in the sea. She seemed embarrassed and began to talk to cover the sounds, and proceeded to tell him about her last day as a fur model.

## **CHAPTER 6**

Her name was Maiko and she worked in the display window of Willard's, the largest department store in the city by the sea. Three days and three nights a week she was a fur model, wearing anything made of fur: rabbit berets to fox gloves and mink stoles, to weasel earmuffs and muskrat-trimmed boots. Sometimes she shouldered a sable purse. She and two other girls modeled in the display window, not larger than a small waiting room, and smiled and waved at those who walked by.

“There was no notice,” Maiko said. “This morning, when I climbed into the display window, ready to work like any other day, I found two women waiting for me. They were mannequins, and I learned they were to replace all the girls who worked as fur models. The woman who had hired me a year ago, she was a family friend, explained that it was a way to cut costs, as commanded from the top, and she had no say in the matter. Fur sales were slow in the summer. She offered a position at the perfume counter, but I refused immediately.”

“Why?” Michael asked. He pushed his empty bowl toward the center of the table, a habit from his life back home. Michael had been exempt from washing dishes because of his paper hands.

“At the perfume counter you have to talk to people. And they want you to tell them what scent is best for them. I know because I’ve talked to the girls who work there. But as a fur model, you don’t have to say anything. The customers just look at you and wish they could be you.”

She sat back and her chair creaked. She looked extremely tired now that she had eaten, but she continued.

“Even though the other models had left as soon as they heard the news, I stayed. I stayed to work that one last day. I had to walk between the arms and legs of the mannequins and act as if we were all at a rooftop party. Normally the other girls and I walked and posed to an unspoken rhythm we all followed, always giving each other distance to take a turn at the front of the glass. The mannequins wouldn’t allow this. They stayed in one spot, commanding the center. I felt like a hamster in a maze.

“Modeling had been my dream, and after several tries to work in fashion shows, I had settled for a job as a fur model. I say ‘settled,’ but soon found that by being the cosmopolitan girl in the window, I was the object of envy for an elite group of shoppers, and I became a minor celebrity.” She smiled to herself.

“That’s got to stand for something,” Michael said. “Couldn’t it help you get a job at another store?”

“Willard’s is *the* store here in the city. Anything less and I might as well be a waitress. Or a girl on the street.”

That last day, she said, only a few shoppers who passed by paused to watch her. As she clumsily squeezed past the tall mannequin with outstretched arms, the frosted mink scarf draped over her shoulders caught on the thumb of another mannequin, and was yanked off. The shock of cool air on her exposed neck made her freeze in place. The other girls had never done something like this to her. Just then an older woman walked by, glanced once at the scene, and saw Maiko, motionless as the mannequins. The woman, scowling with boredom, moved on.

“I panicked,” Maiko said, massaging her damp hair. “I realized something then. I realized that the perfect model was one whose expression never changed.”

Outside the window, she had seen the rain begin to pour. It streaked the glass of the display window, and the last of the people outdoors ran for cover. The sky darkened. The mannequins continued to stare out into nothingness. Maiko watched them watching nothing, until she felt a hot current boil up inside her chest.

“I had to do something. So I smashed them. They all broke apart at the joints, some of them losing their wigs and fake eyelashes. Then I sat down and....” She shook the thought out of her head.

“My family friend paid me in cash for the remainder of the month. I gathered my things in my purse, took one the store’s umbrellas, and then, decided that I deserved a real going-away gift. I put this maribou cape inside my coat before buttoning it up.”

“I understand what it’s like,” Michael said. He had a connection to share with another person—a sensation unlike anything he had felt in a long time. He leaned in and spoke quietly. “The money that was in my valise belonged to my brothers. It was money I thought I deserved, working for them. They didn’t pay me because they assumed I had no use for it.”

“Exactly,” she said. She leaned in too. “We’re very similar. You brothers sound like my family friend. If you’re not careful, people take advantage of you, and then before you know it, you have no control over your situation. Maybe this is a good thing for me, losing the job.”

## CHAPTER 7

They sat and listened to the rain. In the next room, the steady dripping continued. She bit her fingernail. He remembered how he used to bite his fingernails when he was younger. Maiko went down the dark hall, and returned with a cardboard shoebox, where she unpacked several balls of yarn, a cushion, shaped like a mushroom, that was stuffed with pins, and a handful of spools of thread. With her chin, she pointed for him to sit closer.

“You might be surprised to know that I’m a very good seamstress,” she said.

“You don’t know how many other fur models were rescued because of me.”

“Rescued from what?”

“They could have lost their jobs. When their outfits didn’t fit right, they would ask me to do quick alterations to them. Take out the hem here, tighten the darts there. You’d be surprised how small alterations can make something the perfect fit. Take off your shirt.”

“My...?”

“I’m going to fix your arm,” she said.

His segmented fingers loosened his tie and fiddled with the shirt buttons, but he couldn't do it with one hand. She watched him as he struggled. Eventually he turned away to have a modicum of privacy.

"Don't worry. I don't mind what your body looks like."

"It's not that," he said, thinking of the dents and soggy spots he had discovered on his torso earlier.

"We should check for more damage. Here," she finally said, and quickly undid the buttons. She opened the two panels of his shirt like a book. Michael's reflex was to cover himself with his hands, but he only had one arm to do this. She calmly lowered his good arm to his side. "You still need to dry. Look here, you're soaking wet on your side." Her fingers grazed his ribs; he flinched. "Are you ticklish?"

"No. I don't know," he said.

"Relax." She tilted her head to study his shoulder socket. Michael, to avoid seeing his body in the light, glanced up at the water stains on the ceiling. "I want to keep the repair as close as possible to the original."

First she popped the flattened fingers of his detached arm back into shape. Then she began to sew. Michael held his breath as the thread moved in and out of his paper skin, and saw how the arm became loosely connected to his shoulder. He worried that, despite her commitment to stick to the original construction, he would never be the same. This new stitching would make him move differently, and like the alterations Maiko gave to the clothing for the other models, this one alteration would make the difference between survival for another day and being sent away.

A few times she rested her free hand on his leg. She held extra pins between her lips and exhaled through her small nose. Michael could feel his body trembling—he figured it was because he was cold. He didn't want to dwell on how vulnerable he was, in this stranger's kitchen, with a strange woman making changes to a body that didn't accept change so readily. When she was done, she had him move both arms up and down, and then left to right, to test the new stitches.

“How is it?” she asked. She hovered around his shoulder with the needle, a long trail of thread twisting around her small waist.

He walked the hall and could feel a slight shift of weight with each swing of his arm. His body seemed to lean on the left shoulder, whereas before his weight always sat in the center. When he explained this to Maiko, she had him sit again, but she could not find a solution other than tightening the thread.

“Any tighter and it might break.”

He walked again and it felt no different. It wasn't bad, for he could still walk, but it wasn't his same walk as before. She stood before him, and for the first time he noticed that he was taller than her. She was glancing at each shoulder, he guessed, in order to ensure they were even, but her breathing had changed, and her gaze was no longer on his shoulders, instead trailing down his soggy torso. This time there was no hiding the fact that he was shaking.

From the staircase above came a harsh knock on the door.

They both leaped back, Michael knocking against one of the dining chairs and Maiko spitting the needles she had clamped in her mouth onto the floor. Without thinking

he ran down the hall and hid in the bathroom. He listened to a man's voice talking to Maiko. A few minutes later she knocked on the bathroom door.

“It's only the engineer. He's here to clean up the flood water. It always happens. The drawing room floods whenever it rains.”

Michael opened the door to find her smiling at him, his shirt draped over her shoulder.

“Did you see yourself run? You're as good as new.”

He waited in the hall, disturbed by the sucking sound of the engineer's vacuum tube, which snaked from the front door along the length of the stairs. It writhed around every so often from the large globs of water it gobbled up.

“It sucks anything in its path,” Michael said.

“Cover your ears, and pretend it's not there,” Maiko said.

He raised his hands, his left shoulder tightening as he did so, and placed his palms over his ears. The sound of the vacuum still seeped inside.

## **CHAPTER 8**

Once the engineer was gone, Michael returned to the kitchen. He was becoming more comfortable with being in the bright light, yet when she passed by him, he turned his head so that the dented side of his face was out of her view. She seemed to notice, though, and stopped in her path to the stove.

“I could try to do something for this dent,” she said, touching his caved-in eye socket. “But I’m afraid I might make it worse.”

“Nothing could be as bad as this.”

She mashed together some of the remaining newspaper from his dinner with a few drops of milk. When she pressed it against his face he flinched from the shock of coldness.

“The problem is that since you’re so exposed, even this small amount of wetness will seep in.”

“But if it were dry, then it wouldn’t stick to my face.”

“Exactly. Quite a dilemma.”

She studied the part of his face for a while. Michael focused on the handle of the refrigerator and imagined all the things that were inside. He didn't think she kept very much.

"Perhaps what I need to do is paint you first."

"Can you?" His voice was filled with excitement, just like a child anticipating a treat.

"At least if you had an even skin color, then the dent wouldn't be so noticeable."

She searched her apartment, but as she had expected, there was no paint.

"I should have asked the engineer. We can get paint tomorrow. I know where we can go. In the meantime, you should take off your clothes and I'll wash them."

"But what will I wear?"

"One moment." She went into her bedroom and returned with a robe.

"Put this on for now."

In the bathroom he removed his filthy suit and put on the robe. He was enveloped by the fragrance of vanilla and coughed a few times.

"Are you all right?"

"I'll be out in a minute."

The robe was a bit short in the sleeves, and only went to his knees, but at this point he was tired and didn't care. In the kitchen he handed her his clothes, ignoring her gaze as she assessed him.

"Tomorrow we'll find some paint."

She filled a pot with water and a dollop of bleach and dropped his underwear and white collared shirt inside. For the suit she rinsed off the dirt and dried slime and then hung it on the curtain line that separated the kitchen and drawing room. It dripped water into a pan she had placed underneath.

“Come with me. It’s time we go to bed.”

He slept on the floor of her bedroom. The drawing room wasn’t available since it had to dry, and the hallway, Maiko had said, was no place to sleep. It didn’t seem odd to him because everything in this place was odd, and he didn’t think to object to anything. He had no basis on which to object—he was a blank slate and had to accept whatever would bring his life back into balance. When he lay on the bedroom floor, she piled several towels on him to help dry out any moist spots left on his body.

“We’ll get you all fixed in the morning.” She smiled and patted him on the head, as if he were her new puppy; then she climbed into bed and flicked off the lamp switch. Darkness took over the room.

## CHAPTER 9

The next morning he woke to find his body entirely dried. This pleased him and gave him hope that his life was not over, and that a new life was about to begin. Maiko reviewed the spots on him that had been dried and gave the approval that all was good.

“Now, for some paint. You need to get dressed, but your clothes aren’t ready. Wait here.”

She returned with a suit of her own and told him to get ready.

“I can’t wear women’s clothes.”

“Why not? You’re small enough to fit in it.”

Michael grumbled.

“Don’t worry. No one will notice.”

“It’s not what I had in mind.”

“The suit is the last thing people will notice about you.”

It was tight in the shoulders, elbows, and knees, but his waist was narrow enough to fit in the pants. The hem of the sleeves and pants was too short, but Maiko thought it looked stylish on him.

They ascended the stairs, and from the front door Michael cautiously peered out from the front door. The sun was out, the sky clear and the road dry. The only evidence of yesterday's rainstorm sat in the gutter—a pile of wet leaves.

“Has it really only been a day?” he asked.

“It's always like that here. One day it's one thing, and the next day, it's as though nothing ever happened.”

“I'm afraid to go out,” he said. “My face is so distorted.”

“I'm afraid too, but I still go out. Look at this wrinkle forming under my eye. It won't ever go away.” She pointed at the base of her left eye. Michael could see nothing out of the ordinary. She sighed, though, ran down the stairs, and returned a few minutes later with a sun helmet.

“Wear this. No one will think twice.”

“That's ridiculous. Now I'll really stand out.”

“Let them think whatever they want.” Maiko pushed them out and locked the door. “We're going. Here, take my arm.”

They linked arms and Maiko laughed. She teased the helmet a bit and then they set off, her maribou mantle clasped around her neck.

“This is so exciting,” Maiko said. “I'm living through your experience. I want the city to be good to you. I already feel better about myself now.”

His one arm still felt strange to him, but even stranger was the feeling that he had no control of his movements. When she stopped, he had to stop. When she turned, he followed. His body didn't have the weight to alter their path.

Although he wanted to see everything that passed by—the hatters, druggists, bicycle shops, the people, the cars—Michael kept his gaze focused on the ground. He was too afraid that people would notice his face otherwise, and by keeping himself preoccupied with the number of cracks in the sidewalk, the journey to their destination went by quickly.

“This is Willard’s,” Maiko announced. They stood before the doors, where only yesterday Michael had watched the young girl splash in a puddle, before being swept away by her mother in a taxi.

“What are we going to do?”

“Wait here. I’ll be back in five minutes.” She unclipped her maribou mantle and wrapped it around him. “Don’t talk to anyone, and don’t move.”

He continued to stare at the ground, counting the number of spots where gum had been spat out and smashed into the concrete. Several times, as people entered the department store, he turned his back to them. The dent in his face flared up tingling, hotter than the rest of his body.

Maiko returned ten minutes later with her purse bulging. She put her mantle back on, and then led him to the side of the building.

“Look at them,” Maiko said afterward, as they passed the mannequins in the display window, furs draped across their still necks. “No one will buy furs from these girls. They’re lifeless.”

Michael paused before the window. One of the mannequins had a broken thumb. In the glass he saw the outline of his dented face; he turned to Maiko.

“And look,” she said, “no one’s even stopping for them. No one will ask them for autographs later. It’s destroying the art form of modeling.”

While she said this he noticed she had become quite agitated. She had changed her posture and let her maribou mantle slide off to expose one of her bare shoulders. She had sucked in her cheeks and pouted like a fish. Then she strutted before the window, before a constant crowd that passed them by; no one stopped or stared at her. In fact, Michael felt that people were purposely ignoring them. In the sunlight, he noticed that her mantle, which had appeared luxurious and rich in the dark apartment, was actually a bit tattered, and the fur was flat and had a few missing tufts. She continued her long strides, back and forth, the mannequins behind her and staring straight ahead, ignoring her just as much as the crowd.

“No one is paying attention,” Maiko said. “When I’m in the window, everyone stops.”

“Maybe it’s because you’re on the sidewalk, and you’re the same height as them,” Michael said.

“So I have to be above them to get any attention?”

She looked as if she might cry.

He placed his hand on her arm and said, “I’m watching you.”

## **CHAPTER 10**

In the apartment he stripped to his underwear, standing on sheets of the day's newspaper, shy of the exposed parts of his body. Maiko painted on a glowing, fresh coat. The color was slightly off from his previous skin tone color, making him appear somewhat gray under the kitchen light. Just as the repairs to his arm transformed him in a small way, the new paint altered him too. Each of these was a good thing, he told himself, believing that underneath these temporary changes he was still the same.

He had to stand for several hours to dry. They had discussed bringing him outside, so that he would dry faster, but he refused to go anywhere else in his underwear. While he waited she cleaned the kitchen, then flipped through the remaining sections of the newspaper. She was holding the classifieds section when she paused to study his features again.

“If you lost your money, you could always find a job. What kind of work do you do?”

“I don't have a job.”

“How do you expect to live in the city, then? You’ll need one, and you’ll need money.” She appeared very serious about this.

“I used to work in accounting. Bookkeeping.”

Her face brightened. “I’m sure the city needs many bookkeepers. You could help them get in order. But wait, you need a work permit.”

There was a long pause. He wasn’t ready to make a decision. He had begun to feel the possibilities of his new life already narrowing; before it had seemed like an open field, and now a door was closing—the arm repair first, then the new coat of paint, and the women’s clothing he had to wear. He wasn’t one for analyzing his situations in the moment, only after, and usually only through drawing something in his notebook that was vaguely violent. The past day, though, had awakened something long asleep inside him. He was beginning to feel afraid, and excited, and hopeless all at once, like a faint crack into a previously inaccessible region. He had never asked himself “What do I want?”, only “How can I escape?” This unexplored part of him was like a long, shadowed valley inside, and it was something he had to explore.

“I don’t know what I’ll do.”

“I’ll show you how to survive in the city. You can learn from my mistakes.”

The next morning, he woke to find Maiko at the kitchen table with a stack of construction paper and a pile of pens. She said they were going to make flyers for his own bookkeeping business.

“I’m going to teach you how to live here. We’ll make a hundred, and get your name all over the city.”

“I hadn’t really thought that far ahead,” he said.

“Problem number one.”

He liked to draw flat figures in the style of ancient art, because it was simple and fast, and because his segmented fingers made drawing difficult. In the center of the flyer he drew a T chart with a stick figure of himself balancing the T, to show he could balance debits and credits.

Michael had vague desires to be an artist, but had never talked about it with anyone. His father was an art teacher who had always criticized Michael’s artistic attempts as a child, and while Michael knew his father was only trying to get him to make something even better, Michael lost interest after the critiques.

One day, several months after his accident, his father had seen a discarded drawing, a crumpled ball of paper beside the wastebasket, and asked Michael to sit on the living room couch. At first Michael was upset, because he had just given up on the drawing of a bird that looked more like a dog with wings. As he approached his father, he prepared mentally to hear his criticism, usually a string of artistic words—balance, perspective, light and dark relationships, empty space—terms his father freely flung around the house. But when Michael sat in the living room, the crumpled ball of paper stayed on the floor, and instead he was given a pile of bills and asked to compare them to the checkbook ledger.

It didn't take much time for Michael to transcribe simple digits into the ledger and check off the items on the paper statements. A check mark was simple—it could be a single tick mark, or it could have a small foot. Check marks and numbers were easier for his hand to master. The following month, after Michael listened through the walls to his brothers talking with girls, or sometimes doing more, his father asked him to balance the checkbook again. Soon enough it became Michael's chore to help balance the budget every month, and to help his father with his tax returns.

Balance was the theme Michael wanted to convey on his flyers. And yet, as he sat at the table with Maiko, who was imitating his drawing on her stack of papers, and he saw the outlines of his dented face silhouetted on the table from the lamp above, he wondered how someone with his own life out of balance could help others attain balance in theirs.

## **CHAPTER 11**

That afternoon, Michael and Maiko plastered the posters with wheat paste on trees, telephone poles, streetlights, and street signs. They covered several of the flyers advocating that the city be split in two, sometimes three new cities.

“You take this side and I’ll take the other,” she said, and split the pile of flyers.

In the crosswalk, he was joined by many others. Here they were, in a single gap, a space between two sides of a street, mixing as they passed each other, and then they were separated, one material for the briefest moment that then went separate ways. The most striking thing, Michael decided, was the people. There was such a variety of people and they seemed to be unfazed by each other, always in motion.

For his side, Michael felt extremely self-conscious. Would anyone object to him pasting on city property? Several people glared at him, all of them with sharp eyes and fixed jaws, and he was afraid the sun was too bright and his distorted face would alert people that a stranger was in town. The new coat of paint was too glossy, he thought, and that only brought even more attention to him. It was much different from the day before,

when he was on the bus, in the darkness. Would they discover he had never completed his entry form?

After pasting three flyers, he could no longer see Maiko across the street. Two teenagers in filthy clothes approached him. One of them, a boy with red hair, carried a backpack. The other, a girl dressed in black and wearing a paperboy hat and black gloves, motioned for Michael to come closer.

Michael was afraid they would notice he looked different. He shook his head; he didn't want any trouble. They had startled him and he nearly dropped the glass jar of wheat paste. The wooden applicator was becoming soggy.

"Hey, you," the red-haired boy said.

"Me?" Michael asked. No one else was around.

"Come here, we have a question for you," the girl said.

Michael approached.

"What are you doing?"

Michael thought about the trouble with the inspectors on the bus, and then the one-eyed man. He didn't know how to answer these two now. Anything he said could make the situation worse. So he stood. Why were no other pedestrians on the street?

"What is that?"

"It's paste," Michael said. "I'm trying to start my own business."

"Do you need help?" the girl with the paperboy hat said. Her hand reached for the jar of paste. Michael stepped off the curb and stood in the gutter.

"Careful, you might get hit," the red-headed boy said.

“You should listen to my brother,” the girl said. Michael nodded. He wished just then he had had a sister instead of two brothers. He liked how the two were a team.

“Do you happen to know a one-eyed man?” he asked.

They shook their heads.

“Look, do you mind if we have some of your paste?”

“What for?”

“We’re trying to start a business too.”

“What kind?”

“Hey, what’s wrong with your face?”

Michael turned away. He dropped a chunk of flyers. The adolescents ran to him and picked up the sheets of paper. Michael was secretly thankful, and when they put their hands on his shoulders, comforting him, he had an intense desire to make them his new friends.

“I can’t give you all of it,” he said.

“That’s okay. Half should be enough.”

The boy with the backpack produced a small empty container for butter. They used the wooden applicator to plop half of the paste into their container.

“Thanks.”

Michael eyed the boy’s hand—he was holding an elegant pen.

“What about your pen?”

They looked at each other. Bargaining was essential here, in the city. He needed to ask for something to show they could not walk all over him.

“Give it to him,” the hatted girl said.

They handed Michael the pen. It was beautiful: black metal and with a fine nib.

Michael was already imagining the things he could draw.

“See you around,” the red headed boy said.

The two ran off. Michael was pleased. He went along several more blocks, posting more flyers. When he was out of paste, he headed back. Eventually he saw Maiko, and crossed the street to meet up with her.

“You still have a lot of flyers left,” she said.

“I ran out of paste.”

“You must have used too much, then. Oh well, let’s move on. I know, first let’s stop at a pudding shop. There’s one a few blocks that way.”

They walked on her side of the street, past jewelers, laundries, seed companies, and lithographers. Michael warmed inside. What would it be like to have friends to visit? Even though he was about ten years older than the kids he had met, perhaps he would learn to be friends with people of various ages.

His reverie broke when Maiko gasped.

Across the way he recognized parts of his flyers by the corners of blue paper, but now they were covered by new flyers, scrawled in calligraphy: **SPLIT THIS CITY!**

There were hundreds of them; they overwhelmed the telephone poles and streetlights, and were even clipped to parked cars under their windshield wipers.

“I can’t believe this!” Maiko said.

Michael was stunned. He didn't say anything, though. He realized he should not trust anyone. Except for Maiko.

They continued on their way. A few corners later, Michael noticed that in both directions the streets were evenly spaced, as if plotted on graph paper.

"This part of the city looks so different."

"It's true. The south part of the city, where I live, long ago survived a terrible storm, while this part had to be rebuilt. The city, in case you didn't know, was originally established by seamen from the north. At least that's what I was told. A hundred years ago they brought their wives and set up the town along the coast and farms in the middle. Slowly more buildings rose, but one spring there was a terrible storm in the sea, and the city was flooded. Several years later, another group of settlers arrived and built on top of the city buried in the sand. The south part had survived and had no order, but the north was completely buried, and they wanted to see the water from all sides clearly in case it flooded again, hence the straight streets."

"There's another city underneath?"

"I don't know if I believe that part," Maiko said.

They passed so many shops and neighborhoods that soon he was leading the way, pushing further and further into the city. Maiko struggled to keep up, and hovered over him as people stared. She said she was afraid he would get taken advantage of. They paused at all the windows of the shops, clockmakers, shoe repair shops, watch repair

shops, apothecaries, cafes, and newspaper kiosks. Everything looked vibrant and alive and Michael felt it seeping inside him, just like the rain from the day before. Unlike the rain, this feeling didn't sink him, but rather made him feel like he could float away. He was intoxicated with the variety flooding inside him, and he accepted it. Paper was a very breathable material and could absorb many things besides liquids.

But when they passed one tall building that had a long strip of shade, he saw more evidence of yesterday's storm.

"They're snails that lost their shells," Maiko said. She covered her mouth as if she had uncovered something indecent.

"Those are slugs," he said.

"I've always called them snails without shells."

"But they have their own name—slugs."

"Same thing." She shivered and tugged on his sleeve to go on. As he continued to stare at the slugs dragging their tails, he remembered the dead mermaid, and the wound down the middle of her fin. If he had real skin he would have shivered too.

They left stacks of the flyers in office buildings. They left more in clustered mailboxes. Later, they stopped in a pudding shop and Maiko ate rice pudding while Michael ate some mixed with a sheet of shredded comics. No customers seemed to notice them, Maiko in her fur, and Michael in his sun helmet. They were more focused on devouring their treats.

“Now we wait. I listed my phone number on the flyers. You’ll get a call and be a city dweller in no time.”

“It’s really happening,” Michael said. He wished he could have a big smile.

By evening, they headed north of the bridge that bisects the city and Maiko narrated the major geography. They stood before the United Neighborhoods building, a diamond building before a square park with olive trees. She pointed out the fish market and the bay on the eastern side, and they watched the ships arriving. One of the canals emptied into the harbor and had a sluice gate rusted shut. Once, she said, pirates had entered the city by opening the gate and surfing into the streets inside their small boat. West of them lay streets of squat buildings and symmetrical houses with sidewalks that truncated at the shoreline. To the south, the disorderly streets; to the north, the hill covered in trees with the lighthouse looming above them. The main street that was on the water’s edge was the shoestring street, connecting the north to the south.

“I always thought it was crazy to be surrounded by water and have my skin still be so dry,” she said.

His paper body hummed to the energy around him, and he almost felt fully awake, fully alive, but then a train whistled from the south and he had to clutch the back of a park bench. Once again his body was absorbing things around him, this time the sound of the train. It made his body tremble like a flag in the wind.

“What is it?” she asked. He shook his head, steadied himself. A whistle from a train always stopped his heart. It was the sound he had heard right before the accident, when he went from a normal human to what he was now.

## **CHAPTER 12**

Two weeks went by that dissolved his growing hope. There were several phone calls searching for a bookkeeper, but they all inquired if he already had a work permit.

“Ask them to sponsor you,” Maiko had said over his shoulder. She listened to each call from behind him, whispering lines into his uncovered ear.

Each caller refused. Despite the recent optimism that had risen inside him, it became apparent that living in the city wasn't easy. He doubted again his ability to start a new life. So much had gone wrong already, and yet, he reminded himself, he was still here, still alive. In the meantime, he and Maiko made more flyers and pasted them in new locations around the city, even along streets in the south, where small restaurants and cleaners, businesses that could hardly afford their rent, cropped up, only to disappear after a few months.

In addition, Michael was still furious about the two teenagers he had met. That first night after they had posted flyers, while Maiko took a bath, he tried out his new pen

on the back of an extra flyer. He was about to draw the two kids, with the plan to give them evil eyes, but no ink flowed. He shook the pen violently, then finally unscrewed it.

There was no ink in the cartridge.

With the new skin he favored going outside more often, although he still wore the sun helmet to distract from the large dent on the side of his face. To be around people, tall buildings, and smell the salty air was thrilling. He often imitated people walking in front of him. What he wanted was to blend in so well that he was almost invisible. He practiced different gaits, swings of his arms, hunching his shoulders or pulling them back. Listening to their voices, he even tried on their vocal patterns, including the voices with megaphones demanding that the city split in two. On an empty street, he shouted their demands with their same intensity, where only the mockingbirds listened and nodded with approval when he sounded just like the original.

Once, after a practice session of walking and talking on a side street, he joined the main road at a street corner that was crowded with demonstrators. This was a common sight in the city, and he had been careful to watch them from a distance. They were fascinating. There were so many voices, so many body types and movements, that despite being a single mass, they were disjointed and ready to burst in all directions. Michael approached cautiously, considering whether he could safely blend in with them and be a part of their crowd, or whether they would eject him as an outsider. Before the tall building that stood at the corner, someone began throwing anchovies at the windows. Then from the crowd came bodies of squid and octopus, fresh from the fish market that

stuck to the glass and slid down, leaving streaks of slime. Michael dodged the falling sea creatures, afraid their wetness would ruin his newly painted skin. Police arrived; the crowded erupted, and Michael hurried away.

When he returned to the apartment, Maiko stood at the bottom of the stairs, clutching the fur cape to her throat.

“Where have you been?” she said. “I was worried. You have to be careful out there. People will try to hurt you.”

“I was just out for a walk.” Before walking down the stairs, he dusted his coat for any evidence from the corner demonstration.

The tenth call came from a fish cannery in the harbor. It happened one morning while Maiko sat at the kitchen table altering a shirt she had found in the street and then had washed to give to Michael.

“M&M Bookkeeping,” Maiko said when she answered the phone. “One moment.” She covered the mouthpiece. “Another customer!” she whispered to Michael, who was leafing through the classified ads of the City Mirror.

“A client,” he corrected her.

He spoke in single word sentences. Maiko waited. “Ask if you need a work permit,” she said. But he didn’t. When he hung up the phone, he sat at the table and said nothing.

“Well?” she finally asked, holding his hand in hers.

“I might have a job,” he said to Maiko. “No work permit required.”

She leaped up and hugged him. He stumbled back from the impact, reeling from the closeness of her body to his. Despite her vanilla perfume, in the curve of her neck he smelled the scent of mushrooms.

“What did they say?”

“They want me to stop by tomorrow morning. What will they say about my body?” He pawed at the dent on the side of his face. At a job interview he would be under close scrutiny, and each imperfection would be a debit against him.

Maiko observed his face, turning her head to take him in from all angles. He lowered his hand and allowed her to stare at the dent. Her look was never malicious—it always had genuine concern and he was beginning to feel comfortable around it.

Her cheeks brightened as she smiled.

“I know! I’ll make you a mask. To even out your face.”

In the bathroom he looked at his face one more time. It was the last part of him that still had damage from his first day in the city. He turned first to the good side, then to the dent. It still shocked him when he saw it under a light. The day of the rainstorm, the one-eyed man and the dead mermaid—everything seemed like a dream from long ago. He had been so afraid that day. What would have happened if he had not made it to the bridge? Where would he be if he had not crossed paths with Maiko?

He decided that she could approximate his true face again by mirroring the good side. He glanced again in the mirror, wondering what his father would say if he could see Michael now.

Using the lid of the toilet as a table, Michael smoothed down a piece of toilet paper and began writing a letter.

*Dearest father, I love my new life in the city.* With a sharpened pencil he had taken from the kitchen, he wrote slowly and carefully to make his writing as clear as possible.

*I have found work, and I already have a new home. I live with a woman who cares deeply for me. She prepares my meals and washes my clothes. She has improved my body and made me more resistant to the elements.*

In the bathroom, the apartment felt very warm and stuffy. He wanted just then nothing more than lots of water poured on his body. It was a dangerous desire—part of the reason why he desired it—but also because it seemed to be the only thing that would have a calming effect, because the energy inside him was so hot that he could set his paper body on fire from the inside out. A douse of water, so seductive and so necessary.

Maiko was in the kitchen waiting for him. He tucked the letter in his pocket.

“Now for the mask,” she said, unbuttoning his shirt, then reclining him against the kitchen table. She rubbed a sticky, cold jelly on his face that made his entire body shiver. She began layering strips of newspaper across his nose. He lay on the table listening to the sound of her tearing paper, in the dark, before he finally opened his eyes.

Eventually he asked her, “Did you ever want to be an artist?” If he had better hands he would have liked trying sculpture. Seeing Maiko’s fingers stirred this vague desire to do more art.

“I don’t know. I like to make things, but I just think of myself as more into crafts than art.”

“What’s the difference?” He had never distinguished the two; now it seemed there were two methods to achieve the same thing.

“I suppose it’s how serious you are about what you’re making. Don’t move your mouth now.”

He watched her, and it was strange and exciting that he could observe her so close and she didn’t seem to mind. She hummed out haikus and brushed her bangs, and glue stuck to the strands of black hair. She had the sprinkle of freckles across her cheeks that he was used to seeing, and a little brown mole on her jaw shaped like the cap of a mushroom.

“This needs to set a bit before I can remove it,” she said. He continued to lie on the table, waiting. Then, like most sensations in his paper body, it took a few moments to realize that her hands were resting on his stomach. He stayed still, for it was more important to him, in this moment, to show that he wasn’t afraid, even though he felt himself trembling inside; it was more important to show that he was no longer an adolescent from the inland, but a city dweller who could handle any surprise thrown at him. The hands were moving, in ever so slow strokes, and through the eye holes of the mask he saw her head turn to look at him.

“You’re so lucky,” she finally said. “You’ll always be young. You don’t have to worry about getting older.”

“But I want to be older. I want to look my age. Someday I want gray hair and aches in my joints.”

She laughed. “You say that now.” Her hands brushed along his chest.

He didn’t know what to say. He lay there, a huge weight pressing upon his body. He thought he might be suffocating. He lay in a half waking state, until she pulled off the mold and wiped the jelly from his face. Then, the mask in her hands, she added more paper pulp to the mold to shape it and compensate for the distorted, dented side of his face.

“This needs to dry,” she said, “before I can paint it.”

Despite having the mask removed, he still felt a huge weight pressing upon him. “I’m going for a walk,” he said, sitting up.

“But it’s night time,” she said. “It’s not safe.”

“I’ll be fine. I won’t talk to anyone.” She frowned. He tried to ignore her stare. After putting the sun helmet on, he pocketed his pencil. As a substitute to a shower, he decided, he would walk at night where the sea air felt like cold water. If he stayed inside any longer he would explode. “I need some air after having the mask on.”

She studied him, looking for a reaction, he assumed. He didn’t know what to give her as a response.

“Don’t be too long,” she said.

## CHAPTER 13

*In the evenings we drink wine from the north and watch the sun set over the city.* As he wandered the neighborhoods and passed more pudding shops and coffee houses, he remembered at home the scent of the stacked bags of coffee stored in the gymnasium, bags that had an underlying stench of vomit. He passed restaurants that smelled of fish sauce and sandwich shops that smelled of onions, and he took in all sights of the people inside and out. He observed how they moved behind the glass, how they interacted with their surroundings on the sidewalk, and he imagined how he could act like them. He could be like any of them.

He hiked the hill at the north end of the city and sat under a crop of apple trees. Maiko had said that years ago a farmer had tried to start an apple orchard, but the city claimed the land as theirs, and the farmer had to give up his property, and eventually became a poor shoeshiner. This confirmed another lie he had heard—the one-eyed man’s story about the money trees. From this view under the branches, Michael was shocked to see how dark the city was. Most of the lights had been turned off now. He wondered what

time it was. Behind him the lighthouse occasionally panned its single eye of light across the city before swinging it over the dark ocean.

The darkness of the ocean was no different than the darkness that spilled onto the hills inland. So far apart and so similar, he thought. What had frustrated him most of all about his situation, prior to moving to the city, was to have time stopped in his own life but to have seen his brothers, all younger than him, grow into adults while he was stuck in the same body from when he was fifteen. They had transformed from skinny sticks to full grown men with facial hair and dry knuckles from working in the coffee field. They ate like lumberjacks, even though they were coffee farmers, and they were responsible and loyal to their work and each other. Michael's paper body stayed the same, and no hair grew on his painted jaw or above his rolled paper lips. His arms stayed the same size, stunted in this shell of a body he had to wear, no matter how many bags of coffee he dragged across the gym floor to the scale.

But now here he stood, above the compact city, its lights and sounds and smells below him, all within his grasp. He had been afraid upon arrival, when he had encountered all his setbacks, but now his new life was about to happen. Of course there were bumps along any road. They always made sense, he told himself, only when had some distance to look back. There was no reason to be afraid of another one-eyed man, or any more rain: the new coat of paint was stronger than the previous one, and he now could see, looking back, that he was long overdue for a new coat anyway.

The sensation of a line, from his feet to his head, pulsed inside him, the beginnings of a sense of control. He wouldn't be like the dead mermaid. She had tried to

change too much, from a fin to a set of legs. He now understood that he would always have limits with his body, but at least he could mimic others and slowly blend himself into the city.

Below the lighthouse, he imagined himself and Maiko drinking wine, watching the whales from a rooftop apartment. That version of himself was not fully inside him yet. But somewhere in this city it existed, and he could absorb it as he had absorbed the rain and the energy around him. He now had this stronger body, and would have a new face, so it was logical that next he could focus on improving his interior self.

West of the city lay the darkness of the sea. In bookkeeping, the point was to find a balance in debits and credits. Here the balance was not visible. The small lights all over the city did not equal the darkness, especially the darkness of the sea. He pictured what lived inside the water, what was just below the dark, flat surface. He pulled out the pencil and added to his letter. *I've seen whales at sunset; their fins are silhouetted against the orange poppy that is the sun.*

When he returned to the apartment he saw a large man in an unbuttoned coat leaning against the wall, holding himself up with one hand. Someone was crying—or the night wind was howling. A car drove by and its headlights illuminated the man's shirt, stained with bright red blood.

“Are you all right?” Michael asked. As he approached the man let go of the wall and tried to walk forward, but he instantly collapsed. Michael's first instinct was to step away, afraid that his paper body would be crushed by the weight of the man, but

something overtook him, a kind of courage he had not felt before, and he braced his legs to absorb the impact. The man's body balanced itself on Michael's shoulders, and Michael was able to use his arms to hold the man. During all this the man moaned several times, and his bloody shirt swept across Michael like a giant paintbrush.

The apartment door opened.

"What's all this?" Maiko appeared. She stood for a moment, registering what had happened, and then she screamed. She ran to the man's other side and helped balance him. The man kept muttering words that made no sense.

"M-m-m-m-my," the man said.

"Who did this?" Michael asked. The man looked into Michael's eyes, and before Michael would have been terrified of the attention, but this time he told himself not to look away, and held the man's gaze.

"Migrants," the man said.

"What?" Michael asked.

"The western neighborhood," Maiko said. "Where a lot of immigrants live. They're the biggest supporters of splitting the city."

"Did they get you too?" the man said. His face was glossed with sweat and his eyes were focused on Michael's dent. Michael said nothing, but the comment lingered inside him. He wished the damage had been because of a violent act upon him, instead of something as simple as rain. They helped the man to his apartment. After they had left him with his wife, who had thrown the key so they could bring him into the apartment above, Maiko rushed Michael downstairs.

“We have to get that blood off you before it soaks in,” she said. But when they removed his shirt, they found the blood had not penetrated his new skin. The blood glided on the surface of his body and was easily wiped away.

“Look at that,” Michael said, and tried to smile.

## CHAPTER 14

They retreated inside Maiko's apartment. He rushed down the stairs to see the mask, but in the kitchen she blocked his view of the table.

"It's not ready yet. Don't look. You should go to bed. You've had a long night and have a long day tomorrow."

He tried to move around her, almost as if they were playing a game, and she broke into her laugh: *Tee hee hee, tee hee hee.*

"All right," he said. "But wake me up when it's ready."

In the bedroom, he crawled under the sheets and listened to the strokes of the paintbrush lapping at the paper mask. It had been a long time since he had slept in a bed. He wondered if she would object. The steady, rhythmic stroking reminded him of his first night in the apartment, when the water from the rain dripped in steady drops in the pool of water in the drawing room.

*I'm sorry I left without saying anything. It was time I try out life. Ten years was enough time to stay in one spot.* He inhaled the scent of mushrooms from the pillow. Against the night stand, he wrote the last line to his letter: *I hope you found a suitable*

*replacement for me. Regards, Michael.* He dropped the pencil as the sounds of the paintbrush lulled him to sleep.

Later in the night he woke with his hands pressed to his chest. Through the floor vent he could hear the shrill call of a train whistle and its pulsing, chugging motion. He put his ear to the vent and listened. How could the sound of a train travel through these pipes? He wondered where the train was in the city, and where it was going.

Maiko was beside him. She shook him, as if he were sleepwalking, trying to bring him back to reality.

“I’m awake,” he said. Her eyes were luminous.

“Were you thinking of your accident?”

He nodded, and then added, “I was thinking of Mischa.”

Maiko had gathered the sheets around her, exposing his legs to the cool air. “Your girlfriend?”

He shook his head.

“Who is she?”

In his mind he played back the memories he had tried to forget many times.

Maiko shook him out of his reverie. She looked ready to cry.

“Who were you dreaming about?”

“It was a long time ago,” Michael said. He swallowed the cool air, but wanted nothing more than a shower. “She was the only girl I talked with in high school, and she

had liked to call me at all hours and say cryptic things, clues that were instructions on where to meet. In front of others she pretended that she didn't know me."

"That's terrible. No one should ever be so mean to a papier mache boy."

Michael wanted to smile. "This was before. When I had real skin."

He continued to stare at the dark ceiling. "Despite her behavior, Mischa was all that I thought about when I was in high school. We discussed poetry and art all the time. She was the nicest girl."

"But what is it?" Maiko said. Her hands were on his shoulders, her hair draped over one eye, and he remembered the hands of the one-eyed man on the bus. For a moment, he wasn't sure if she would strangle him or hug him. He was fresh from sleep, though, so there was no filter in his mind. The thoughts passed from his head to his mouth. There were no layers of paper to get in the way.

"We would go to her bedroom."

Maiko dropped her head on his chest and sobbed.

"Why are you telling me this?"

He gently pushed her away. She used the sheets to wipe her eyes. As the train whistle faded in the distance, he listened to her sobbing, the guttural sounds of living things in the vent, and the creaking of his body from each deep breath. Maiko was the first woman he had spoken with in years. He didn't mention that what happened in the bedroom with Mischa—which was nothing, really. They had read poems to each other, and while he was in love with her, she had treated him like a brother.

He tried to think about his new life, the life he was shaping on his own terms, and that the future was bright as a blank sheet of paper. He sat up and folded his letter on the nightstand.

“The day she left, I took her to a train station. I never saw her again.”

“That was the day you had the accident?”

He turned to Maiko. He put her hands in his. His thumb stroked her palm and she took a death breath.

“Michael, how terrible! She did this to you. No wonder. Oh, why didn’t you tell me?”

“She didn’t do this. I did it myself. I went back there to look for her each day.”

She nodded. “I dated a man, briefly, when I first moved here. I realized soon enough that he wasn’t interested in me as a person. But I stayed with him. I didn’t care. There was something about him, the way his eyes lingered over my body. That look. It made it all worth it. He was an artist and wanted to paint a picture of me. I delayed it as long as possible, because I knew once he had me on his canvas, he wouldn’t want the real me. Eventually he got tired of waiting.”

They sat holding hands. Both confessions hung heavy in the room. Then she leaped up and ran down the hall.

“Maiko? Where are you going?”

It felt as if he were still asleep, or underwater. She returned slowly from the kitchen, her peignoir flapping behind her like a tail.

“It’s ready,” she said and presented the mask. When they climbed into the bed a spring squeaked like a voice.

The mask had the same vague, sickly gray paint as his skin, with a slight redness near the cheeks. The eye sockets were cavernous. The mouth had complete lips, and one corner of the reddish paint she had used extended, a slight brushstroke, into the cheek area. The nose looked a bit larger, but he assumed that was so his real nose would fit. The best thing about the mask, though, was that it was symmetrical. It had no dent on one side. This mask, despite its small imperfections, was closer to the face he’d had before.

“It looks just like me.” He could have said something more, something affectionate. For a moment, he was unsure of how he felt, and if he hesitated, this uncertainty would become apparent to her.

“Put it on,” she said, but she put it on for him. She tightened the painted string around the back of his head. “Face me, now.”

He panicked at first and thought he was suffocating. He reached to pull it away, but the string was too tight. He felt Maiko pull his hands away, then stroke the cheek of the mask. It was so distant—in fact, he didn’t really experience the touch at all, only heard the dry fingers stroke the dry paper mask. Then he realized he couldn’t see properly out of the eye holes. He turned to her.

“Let me adjust it a bit. Hold still.”

‘Okay,’ he said. His voice sounded muffled behind the mask. As if it filtered the tone of his voice to become the voice of someone else.

“Is that better?”

‘That is better,’ he said. ‘My voice, though. Do you hear the difference?’

“I hear nothing.”

‘It’s just the sound of my own voice, then,’ he said, more to himself.

The new job would work out. His new life would smooth out. He believed these thoughts as she had placed the mask up to his face, and from the eye slits he watched her grin spread wider. She pulled him close and they were hugging. She held on tight, tense, taut—he was going to be crushed. Then he felt the softness of her lips pressing against his forehead.

“I barely know you and you’re already like a little brother to me,” she said. She squeezed him lightly again.

Another disappointment. He was waking up—everything was real now. With the mask and the cool air and quiet night, something inside him loosened, and a wave of sensations and emotions crashed in the paper chambers of his body. With the mask, she looked at him like no one had looked at him in a long time. Could he already be in love again? But she had spelled out their relationship, just as Mischa had done to him ten years earlier. With the mask, he leaned into her and she averted his approaching face, tucking him into the crook of her arm.

“Now, now little brother,” she said. “It’s time for sleep.” She stroked his hair until he pretended to sleep.

With the mask he was someone else.

## **PART TWO: MISCHA**

### **CHAPTER 15**

A new routine formed. In the mornings, Maiko reviewed the morning paper for the weather forecast while he ate the classifieds section mixed with milk; then she attached his mask, handed him his briefcase and—should the forecast mention a chance of rain—an umbrella, and followed him up the stairs to the front door.

Then he went on his own to a bus stop two blocks away, where he waited with several others for bus 257, which headed north to the fish market. From the other waiting passengers they sent occasional glances toward him, that often lingered for a few seconds, but he had learned to focus on a random spot or stain on the street or sidewalk (a technique suggested by Maiko) to make it through such silent interrogations. Eventually, people would look away, more interested in the constant sound of seagulls, and Michael would still be standing, no longer running off to wait behind a telephone pole for the next bus, as he had the first few days.

His job was on a gigantic ship, parked in the harbor beside the fish market. Each morning he pressed his way past the poles that had his flyer posted, through the bustling aisles of shoppers eager to buy the fresh sea creatures set on ice or swimming in small tanks. He was careful to dodge the small puddles of melted ice or sludge that formed from loose fish skin and scales; he secretly enjoyed stepping on the discarded shells of crabs and lobsters. The shells were thin enough that his weight could crack them, and it sounded to him as if he were cracking bones.

His new client, a tuna cannery, was nothing like the work he had done inland. His brothers and their coffee farm had kept him busy not only with the bookkeeping, but checking the inventory and weighing the bags of beans that were stored in the former gym. Like most clients, though, the cannery was oblivious to how much work was required to get them on track. But whether it was coffee or tuna, the same accounting language would work.

His first day, he had crossed a small bridge over the harbor water to a black ship that glistened like a freshly emerged whale, with the words HOLLOWAY & HOLLIDAY TUNA painted across the side in red. A man whose clothes were stained with fish blood directed him to the Controller's office. Michael walked a low-ceilinged hall, its steel walls bubbling with steam and drops of condensation like diseased skin. He stayed in the middle to avoid getting wet. The smell of the ship hit him that first day and each day thereafter whenever he passed by the boiler room—a mix of seawater, fish rot, and diesel.

That first day, the Controller's office door was open, with a single, exposed light bulb hanging over a desk. A large man with a cigar was scribbling out some receipts, and with the bulb before his face, it looked as if he had one eye. The paper of the cigar glowed around its edges.

"Who's there?" the man had asked.

'My name is Michael. We talked over the phone about the bookkeeping position.'

"Step inside," the Controller said as he spit the cigar into a bucket of gray water.

He proceeded to ask several basic interview questions, ending with, "So you think you know how to make sense of a mess?"

'It's my specialty,' Michael said.

The Controller leaned over the desk and squinted to get a better look. Michael touched the nose of his mask.

"Are you a foreigner?"

'No, sir. But I recently moved to the city. I'm from the inland.'

"Has the city given you a work permit?"

Michael clasped his hands tightly behind his back. He had to brace himself against what had been said. No job seemed interested in helping him.

'I thought your ship said one wasn't required.'

The man grunted.

"I can tell you're into accounting. You're ugly, like me. That's why we go into this line of work, right?" The man laughed, but coughed up some phlegm that he had to spit into a bucket.

Michael shifted his weight, his left arm—the one repaired by Maiko—feeling heavier than usual. He didn't know what to say to the man, but before he knew it, his head was nodding like a puppet.

“You won't need a work permit here. If you need one, we can arrange something. But it's very important for you to know something. We have been accused by the shipping authorities that we are shipping more than tuna to other countries. They demand to see our books, which are nonexistent at this point. Your first task is to make sense of what papers we do have.”

The man reached out, since his office was so small, and was able to open a small metal cabinet. An avalanche of papers and folders crashed to the sticky floor.

“Once you sort all of this, we'll need books for each month for the past two years.”

‘Do you have a chart of accounts?’ This seemed like the right question to start with, Michael thought. There had to be at least one document from which to start that had a key to this chaos.

The man laughed again and leaned out of the direct glare of the light bulb. Michael tugged the knot of his butterscotch tie. Maiko had washed most of the stains on the front of it, although the few left looked intentional, like a pattern on the fabric. If he had pores, he would be have been sweating around his neck.

‘If you have nothing for me to start with, this will take some time.’

“That’s fine. You might see things that don’t belong. Gross invoices that need to be recorded in net amounts. I expect you to put them in the right columns to show we’re doing nothing but tuna here. You’ll be paid nicely for it. Understand, inlander?”

From then on, his daily task was to go to a storage room that was further down the hall, a room lined with shelves filled with rows and rows of black helmets. He used a bucket to occasionally scoop up pages in the Controller’s office and then dump them in the storage room, where he sorted them into chronological piles. The bucket reminded him of the barrows of coffee that were recorded in the ledger book he had managed back home. Again he remembered the scent of the stacked bags of coffee had a vague hint of vomit. Here, though, the smell of the buckets was of fish and rotten organic material, bits of fish bones fossilized along the rim. He wondered if the stench would seep and settle into his paper skin.

He returned to the ship each weekday, during which he created a new chart of accounts for Holloway & Holliday. This would be the system that explained where all the money went and was received—in theory. His own accounting tricks back at home that resulted in him acquiring extra money for himself were helpful for this new task at the cannery. The Controller had seemed pleased and told him to proceed, and left Michael on his own.

Each day his work usually began with one invoice that he pulled from the pile. It was normally for the purchase of thousands of tuna cans (any paperwork that wasn’t related to tuna was to be thrown into the furnace at the end of the day in a single pile,

although he never did it because of the heat). The invoice was simple, with only one line item, but the quantity column had the number 5,000. For some reason this always made him think of himself. He was one person, but had the capacity for 5,000 different people he could become. Already though, he was beginning to feel his number had been reduced because his body was damaged and he only had one skill that made him money. There were so many other people he could be, perhaps only 3,000, but he tried not to let this reduction discourage him.

In between, when he was bored, he would draw. He drew the Controller and the rows of helmets around him. In the back pages of the journal ledger, he drew other figures. He tried drawing the city's buildings, and the people he encountered each day, cataloging the things he liked or didn't. Sometimes he exaggerated a feature, such as a nose or slouch. Their clothes, their eyes, women or men, he drew them all.

While the work was slow and uneventful, there was one problem. When he emerged from the ship each evening, shocked from leaving one environment and entering another, he would wipe his mask with a handkerchief to remove the condensation and find streaks of paint. In addition, the heat on the ship caused the paint on his mask to bubble, and every night Maiko would have to repaint it. Eventually, after his first payment, paid to him by the Controller in cash, Maiko bought enough supplies to make a cabinet in the closet full of masks. She seemed pleased to have a role in helping him prepare each day. They developed a routine where she rotated the new ones out from the top shelves and had ones awaiting repair on the bottom.

Each mask had slight variations. Sometimes he had a slight grin on his face; other times his eyebrows looked angry. One mask had cracked while it dried, and it was too late to notice that one eyehole was large and exposed his dented eyesocket until he was at the bus stop and a young girl pointed at him.

“Sorry about that,” Maiko had said when he told her that night. And because they had a reserve of masks, she threw this one away. To see his face on top of the trash in the bin next to the refrigerator made Michael sink deeper into his seat at the table.

Some nights he didn't come home immediately. He wandered the streets, and in the windows—the hall of records, the ice and cold storage shops, and the bustling but barricaded canteens—he observed his reflection; he touched the mask to remind himself that it was not a permanent part of his body. It sometimes felt odd to have on another layer, and other times he completely forgot. Several times he went too far west, and people immediately stopped him and asked for identification. The Controller had given him a fake work permit, but no one on the street noticed. After a while, he learned which streets not to cross that led into the stricter neighborhoods. On the eastern side, he found he blended in better, and was mostly anonymous.

As he wandered, the overpowering scent of honeysuckle in the wind, he thought about the night he had put on the mask, the final seal of protection around his body. But recently he had begun to feel that his new life had too quickly turned into something routine, something static. And that was exactly why he had moved away from his father and brothers. It had taken him ten years to build up the courage to be on his own, and

now it had been a little over a month and already a similar, dull ache was forming inside his armature.

After his accident, he never went back to school, and no one ever tried to contact him. It was then he realized that he had no friends. The only person he wanted to see was Mischa, but she had left on the train and had no idea what had happened to him. The only girls he saw after that were the ones his brothers brought to this house. Once, while walking down the hall past his father's paintings and photographs, a blonde girl emerged from Leo's room and froze when she spotted Michael. He stopped too, and they stood there, the split of paintings and photographs between them.

"You're the boy from school," she had said. He nodded his paper head, still a bit floppy at the time. "They thought you were dead."

Instead of saying anything, he ran back to his room and slammed the door. He paced several times, breathing heavily, before collapsing on his bed. On the floor lay the pages of drawings and handwriting he had practiced on, only faintly resembling the landscape and texts they were actually based on. At that time, he felt life was over and he would never be able to face strangers again. And yet, here he was, despite feeling like a different person, wandering the streets like any other person living in the city.

A truck passed by and blacked out his reflection in the window. He continued on his way, the wooden heels of his shoes clicking against the pavement. He kept his face low as a crowd of young men passed by. They were holding several baseball bats and buckets of paint. Michael hurried on.

Something else caught his eye. Pasted to a pole that displayed the parking rules in front of Willard's was a flyer that flapped in the wind. He paused, stepped closer, and leaned in to read *ABC: Adam's Bookkeeping Company*. It looked almost identical to his flyer, except that the drawing was better. He tore it off the pole and tucked it into his pocket.

A new panic grew in his gut. Someone was trying to displace him from the city. He reviewed the situation, and of course it made sense that these moves were allowed in the rules of living in the city. Anyone could displace you, and your place would be lost. The kids who had plastered their posters over his own flyers were another reminder of nearly losing his place.

## CHAPTER 16

Maiko was in the apartment, sewing a torn sleeve on one of his shirts. She had found several shirts in dumpsters that she laundered and then altered to fit Michael's body, too small otherwise. He presented to her his rival's flyer. She took one look at it before resuming her sewing.

"It's nothing," she finally said.

'This was in front of Willard's,' he said. 'We only have one client.'

"For now. Don't worry. This will work out. I'm being optimistic now, like you."

'What happens after this assignment ends?'

"Are you ready to eat?" She stood and her dress unpeeled from the couch cushion.

Since the drawing room had flooded, all the furniture had a sticky residue that clung to their clothing.

'I have to remove every one of these from the city,' he said. She ignored him and added mushroom broth to a pot. 'I could lose my place here.'

"That's impossible."

'Look what the mannequins did to you.'

She froze. She tightened her grip around the ladle.

“That’s different. Michael, it’s impossible to remove all of the flyers. I refuse to encourage that. Besides, it’s not safe at all to be out much. You’re supposed to come home right after work. What were you doing by Willard’s?”

‘I didn’t come to this city to hide out in a ship all day and basement apartment all night. I need to be around sunlight, plants, the sea, people.’

She stroked his cheek and pouted again like a fish.

“Soon, my dear. Just wait until all this mess blows over in the city.”

‘I don’t understand why everyone is so angry here.’

He tossed the flyer in the trash. In the closet cabinet, he exchanged his worn out mask from that day for a fresh one. He no longer spent more than a few minutes without a mask. Even when sleeping he wore one. In the bedroom, he scribbled another letter to his father—*Dearest father, today I stayed out all day in the sun*—placed it in an envelope with no return address, and tossed it in the mailbox.

The next evening, after another day of repetitive work, Michael emerged from the tuna cannery ship just as the sun was setting. He walked along the shoestring street for a long time until he arrived at the intersection where the arcade stood to the west and a bridge set off to the east. The bridge now had a booth in the middle of it, where a swarm of policemen and inspectors were handed passports and paperwork by drivers leaving or approaching the city.

He realized he couldn't even leave the city. He had a work permit, but no identification card or papers. Why did the identity of citizens have to be tied to a piece of paper? Perhaps he could find someone to make a fake ID for him. Glancing to the west, he watched the people and building of the city, many leaving their shops and jobs to go home. Everyone looked nonchalant—they could care less about his predicament. The distance to his home inland had never felt so far before.

He walked west, past the people heading home, toward the sun, to soak in the last rays of light. He passed a telephone pole with another flyer for *Adam's Bookkeeping Company*. He tore it off. Down the street he found another, and tore it off; another was torn two blocks later.

Soon he was racing through the streets, and was amazed and horrified at the number of flyers. At first he held them in his hands, crumpled into small rocks of paper, but soon his hands were full; so he littered, and tossed them into the gutter, into the pots of plants, into the branches of magnolia trees, and at the windows of passing cars that flashed his reflection. He wanted to rid the city of this Adam before he had all the jobs for bookkeeping. It was a matter of survival, he said to himself.

Without paying attention he stumbled into trouble. Around one corner he found the same flyer posted three times to a newspaper vending machine. As his painted fingers picked at the edges of the flyers to peel them off, he noticed a crowd of people approaching from one end of the street, and another crowd running toward them, shouting. Immediately they crashed together and the scuffle turned violent. A man in a tank top with tattoos along his arm swung a baseball bat and knocked an older man to the

street. Someone who had approached from the southern street threw a handful of rocks and the people shielded their eyes. During all of this, Michael had torn two of the three flyers off, and felt so close to removing the last one that he stayed, noting that Adam obviously had not used wheat paste but something stronger, something manufactured, and this became the reason why he was too late. The mixed crowd of people, shouting and screaming, tossing debris at each other, enveloped Michael and the newspaper machine. The man with the bat struck the machine several times, the tattoos on his arm twisting and writhing as the muscles in his arms tightened. Michael leaped back, only to be immediately grabbed by several hands that lifted him up.

“He’s so light!” someone shouted. More hands grabbed at him, and then they were pulling him in different directions.

“No new people!” several people chanted.

‘Stop this! Let me go!’ He tried to move but his limbs were clamped. They continued to pull at his clothes and two buttons from his coat broke free. Someone tugged on his arm socket, the one Maiko had repaired. He did not resist for fear of coming apart.

‘I have a work permit,’ he added, but no one heard him. Hands burrowed into his pockets. In the blur of faces surrounding him, he could clearly see Maiko’s neighbor, the man who had bled on him not long ago. Did he not recognize Michael? Or because he was in another district of the city did different rules apply?

“Wait!” a deep voice shouted. The crowd became silent. Michael looked between the waves of fingers and balled fists surrounding him and immediately recognized the speaker by his white eyepatch.

‘My notebook,’ Michael said. He didn’t care about the missing money or clothes any more. At that moment he desperately wanted something from his life before living in the city, and it was the notebook that he wanted more than anything. His heart raced, his blood was glue.

“He doesn’t belong here,” the one-eyed man said. His open eye squinted and he sneered at Michael. “He’s another outlander.”

Michael was surprised by the word. He had only known where he had lived as the inland. To people in the city by the sea, though, he realized, he was outside of them—an outlander.

“Let’s get rid of him,” the one-eyed man said.

The crowd erupted into shouts and rants. The two groups that had been fighting joined forces against Michael. From the mass of hands came the covers of metal trash bins and a chain that smacked across his shins. He screamed. The hands dropped him and he was kicked from all directions. Above him was the one-eyed man, holding the chain in his large hands, using his large steel-toed boots to kick Michael down the street. The man’s lips were coated in spittle that floated away like sea foam in the wind.

He absorbed the pain, thinking about something else. When he had fallen to the ground, he had heard an unmistakable sound: his nose snapping. Luckily, he thought, it only belonged to the mask. When the crowd had thinned away to observe this outlander, he leaped up, more for himself, to prove that he was okay. But then he stumbled.

His right foot had broken off.

The crowd parted in two waves. From everyone's expressions he knew he had brought too much attention to himself.

"You broke him," the tattooed man said to the one-eyed man.

"But what's wrong with his face?" a woman with scratches on her cheeks asked. She pulled her coat tighter against the wind.

Michael touched his mask and confirmed that the nose was indeed broken off. He found it on the ground, but as he leaned over, the entire mask snapped off in the wind and fluttered down the street.

The woman with scratches screamed and the crowd reeled back. Everyone's expressions looked disgusted. His real face, deformed by the rainstorm, was exposed, and while the cold coastal wind blowing felt so invigorating, to have his actual paper face exposed and free of cover, at the same time he was terrified. They all saw the ugliness that was now stamped on him, forever. As the others stood paused and confused, he used their moment of hesitation to grab his detached foot and hobble off.

He rushed to the first open building and went inside. In its dim hallway he leaned against the wall, panting, covering his face, unmasked, with his hands. He was devastated. His body had been badly dented again from all the kicking. Now he had a torn foot. A broken nose. What would he say to Maiko? That she had been right? Why did he have it in his head that he could live a life so different from before? He would always have to be exceptionally careful with a paper body. He could never be like those people and lift heavy things and break them. He could never belong.

*Dearest father, please help me get home.*

It was clear to him now: He wanted nothing more than to leave this place behind. He belonged someplace safe, even if it was boring. He could return home, pay his brothers back. They would understand it as a phase he had gone through. Even though he was the age of an adult, he was still an adolescent trying to catch up.

“Excuse me, are you all right?”

Above him stood a man with oversized black-framed glasses. He wore a deckle-edged, ultramarine suit and on nearly all of his fingers were gold rings with different gems. When Michael looked at him, bewildered by the brightness of the man’s suit in the dim hallway, the man did something no one else had done from the crowd: he smiled.

## CHAPTER 17

“Do you need anything? You look lost.”

The man held out his hand, a gentle hand like his father’s, that emerged from the deckle-edged sleeve. *If I were home now I’d never leave again.* Michael held out his segmented fingers, and the man helped him up. He didn’t look twice at Michael’s dented face or his peg leg.

“Your foot,” the man said, taking it from Michael’s hands. He inspected the contents of the shoe. “You’re in luck. This is an art gallery, and we have some supplies that can fix you.”

“Really?”

“I’ll be right back,” the man said, and disappeared down another dark hall.

Michael walked into the first of the two main rooms and glanced at the paintings hung at eye level across the walls. The room felt warm, inviting—so unlike Maiko’s apartment or the Holloway cannery ship. This room appeared to be ready for a show. The canvases each had their wires exposed, though, something he had never seen before. It was as if the gallery was acknowledging the illusion that artwork appears to hover on a

wall. Here, the nuts and bolts of it all, or rather the nails and wires, were exposed for everyone to see.

As he walked around, peg-legged, his one shoe clicked on the concrete floor. It was a relief to be in a quiet space and be surrounded by art. He missed his father's artwork on the hallway wall in their home that he had walked past every day. If he could leave the city, he would be grateful for the art in their home. Starting in one corner of the gallery, Michael stared at a fascinating piece that didn't look anything like a painting. It was a circuit board, with small silver blocks connected by yellow strips like roadways. The green of the board extended outside of the canvas onto its edges. The piece was labeled *The City*. Briefly, Michael considered if there was a connection to the layout of a city and its connection with nature. Below this title was the artist's name: D. Doppelmann.

The next painting, though, was completely different in style. An elevator, piled with geometric shapes, triangles and cylinders and a circle standing beside the square buttons for selecting the floor. They were all going to floor 77, as that was the only button lit on the console.

Each painting was wildly different in style from the one before it. It was as if the artist had experimented with every style available, from abstract splashes of paint, to glowing blocks of color, to more detailed and realistic paintings of the sea cliffs and the boats. There were several portraits, some with paint so thick it rose above the canvas. It was quite a shock for him—his father's work had always been realistic, perfectly matching the shadows of the clouds on the hills inland, and the patches of cottonwood

trees shimmering. The variety of style and total disregard for matching reality surprised and thrilled him.

That was when he saw the final painting. A girl, looking over her shoulder. Her short black hair was shiny, her face round and moonlike, glowing skin, but she had tiny blood vessels around her small nostrils, the faint hint of a mustache above her lips. Her flat, almond eyes looked at him so desperately. He wanted to reach in and pull her out. Her puckered rose lips held back something that was ready to come out of her, a scream or stream of words. Obscenities. He imagined her upset with the artist, who caught her in such a vulnerable state. Her neck was thin and a bruise stained her arm. It was her eyes, they shimmered, that made him want to hold her.

What was most shocking was that she was a girl he had once known: Mischa. The painting had to be of her. Could she be in the city? Had she moved here after that day ten years ago at the train station? He wondered how the artist came to paint Mischa. Perhaps he saw her in a crowd, and her look burned into his mind. Or perhaps Doppelmann was related to her.

As he went over the painting again, noting the details of her hair, the shape of her earlobes, the corners of her puckered lips, she became more real. It had to be her: the piece was even titled *Mischa, darling*.

He imagined himself, in his new life in the city, with this kind of girl. She had always been his ideal kind of girl—sweet, artistic, slightly adventurous. She would feel sorry for him when she saw he was now made of paper, sorry that she had never called him after leaving on the train. And he could care for her, make that look on her face

disappear and a smile emerge, and she would hold onto his elbow when they walked along the coast. She wouldn't be afraid of the city. The past, something Michael had tried hard to erase by moving here, would finally fix itself in the present, and he could have the relationship with Mischa that had been intended years ago. And they would help each other. The city had been harsh to her as well—she was someone he could trust to get him out. They could return inland and start over.

This possibility thrilled him. The painting showed that he was not the only one stuck in time. She had the same disturbed look from when they were in high school and harassed by popular students. The anxiety of the painting disturbed him. He would make her better than this.

A door shut. The man from the gallery appeared. He held a shoebox overflowing with rolls of tape and paintbrushes. He passed Michael and walked to the front counter, where a bowl of cloudy water housed two red goldfish. The spell broken, Michael took one final look at the painting, and followed the silent man to the front. His peg leg made a hollow tapping on the floor with each step.

“Excuse me, but how would I go about contacting the artist?”

In the apartment, Maiko repeated herself. Why had he not listened to her? Why had he tried to remove the flyers? What would have happened if his mask had not fallen off? What if this? Or what if that? What if the art gallery had been closed?

He wasn't listening to her, though. He was imagining the possibilities of life with Mischa. Where could she be in the city? What would she say about the turmoil in the

streets? Having someone from his past in the city comforted him—perhaps she actually could help him leave the city. He remembered how alive she was, how she looked ready to burst out of her clothes. If she had been in that crowd, she would have held his hand and asked him to join them. With Mischa, they could throw crumpled paper rocks at the others and be a team.

After the attack, Maiko met him every evening outside the ship. She usually did some shopping in the fish market beforehand, and then they took the bus home together. The gallery owner had reattached Michael's foot, but he now had a slight limp while walking. And Maiko, who had inspected his dented sides from being kicked, could only paint over the cracked skin. Now he wore another layer of clothing to fill him out, so that he didn't appear too uneven. The mask with the broken nose was thrown away; for the new ones she added strips of cloth to reinforce their structure.

Something had changed. He now felt different around her. Every time she cooked the same meal, he wanted nothing more than to eat what he couldn't. Each time she folded the corner of the bed as she removed her slippers, he wanted to ruffle the sheets so that they were a mass like seaweed. The repetition began to grind on him. Only the brief fresh air they breathed while walking to and from the bus stop was his relief. He had an intense desire to jump in the ocean, and she seemed to sense this one evening: as he stood looking over the canal wall, at the sluice gate with the waves banging to enter, she dragged him away and never let them walk by it again. They never went near the western neighborhood, where fights in the street were common. He sometimes thought of the

dead mermaid as Maiko shuttled them to and from the apartment, and how he understood what that creature of the sea had gone through to get here on land.

Then, one Saturday, he had a plan to get out on his own. He held his briefcase in one hand and an umbrella in the other. In the briefcase was a letter, encased in a small envelope made from a page of newspaper comics, and on the umbrella was a pattern of colored triangles. The letter belonged to him; the umbrella to her. As he ascended the steps of the basement apartment to the entryway, he heard her bedroom door close below.

“Where are you going?” she asked. Her silhouette stood below him, a mound glued to the bottom step, which gave the appearance of a fin instead of feet.

‘I’m going to work,’ he said. She climbed the stairs to stand one step below him.

“What if you get wet?”

They both listened to the rain falling on the street above; even though it was summer, it felt like a winter storm. The air in the stairwell seemed full of moisture, of steady thrumming from the rain, and was mixing with the heat rising from the kitchen below.

He raised the umbrella.

“And it’s Saturday,” she added.

‘I have to finish the financial reports before Monday.’

“You could get wet again.”

'I'll be careful.' He was wearing his mask, and an urge to pull it off pulsed from his center. He brushed the back of his hand, the one that held the briefcase, across the mask's cheek.

"Don't go." She hooked her hand onto his shoulder. "You can finish it on Monday. Or let me get dressed and walk with you."

'I'll be fine,' he said and opened the door.

The gray, outdoor light split across her face. She had a lovely face, despite the beige lump on her jawline, the mole like a mushroom sprouting. It was true that the financial reports were due Monday.

"You look like a school boy," she said, and straightened his new thin black tie and smoothed his jacket's lapels. "Fine. Stay away from any puddles. And watch for any wind that blows the rain sideways." There hadn't been any news lately of violence in the streets. She wrapped her robe tighter around her body and braced herself against the cool air sinking in. He could smell her vanilla perfume. "If you're not back before dark, I'll be looking for you."

'I'll be careful,' he said again, and popped open the umbrella. He walked the wet street, every time glancing back to see that she still watched him until he was around the corner.

It was true that the financial reports were due Monday. But he was not on his way to work. He was on his way to meet the sender of the letter:

*Michael,*

*I appreciate your enthusiasm for my work. As an artist, I am a devoted fan of trying on as many styles as needed to express whatever it is I am working on. Certain methods better express ideas and feelings more than others. Similar to how some statements in one language sound perfect but can't readily be translated into others. I would be delighted to discuss that one odd minimalist piece *The City*. I think you would enjoy the story behind it if you are so curious. Let us meet this Saturday on the steps of the United Neighborhoods building. Say noon?*

*Best,*

*D. Doppelmann*

## **CHAPTER 18**

The letter was an invitation he could not refuse. That Saturday, Michael walked with his briefcase in one hand and the umbrella held over his head and passed the many shops and neighborhoods that made up the city by the sea. He had learned to avoid crowds and spot potential clashes of people if they were walking too fast or carried objects ready for a fight. This only made him feel more alienated from the city. His move here had been to fit in, and now all he could do was pretend to be a part of city life.

He tried to plan how to act around the artist, Doppelmann. He wanted to appear intelligent, casual, but he also wanted to exude enthusiasm for his work. There were so many possibilities. In the end, he knew one of them would take hold depending on the first words from David Doppelmann's mouth.

He headed for the United Neighborhoods building, a large asymmetrical structure that appeared like a mirrored diamond on a square plot of park. To reach the building, he had to climb a flight of long concrete steps. As he approached he spotted Doppelmann, ten years or so older than Michael, standing like a monument himself, open-collared shirt, longish hair waving in the wind, a cigarette inches from his lips. Something below had

caught Doppelmann's eye, and he stared so intensely that Michael paused and turned around to see what it was. Behind him the weekend traffic had clogged the narrow street below and the street food vendors were setting up their stations on the sidewalks. What could be so fascinating down there? Perhaps Michael was missing it; perhaps it was right before his eyes and he didn't even know it.

"Hello there!" Doppelmann shouted when Michael was only a few steps away. He switched hands for his cigarette and put out his right one to shake Michael's.

'You must be Doppelmann,' Michael said. They shook hands and then Doppelmann raised his index finger to his lips.

"Shhh, you mustn't say that out loud," he said, grinning. "They might hear you and come after me."

Michael glanced around at the few people descending the stairs and those further away on the benches that faced the square of park grass.

'What do you mean?' Michael asked.

"It's nothing. I'm becoming of interest for my neighborhood, and they want me more involved with their efforts to secede. But the truth is that no one cares about art and artists right now. They're all focused on survival and their own problems. Every so often they think art can teach them to survive and so they come to me. Let's walk, shall we? And why is your umbrella open? It's stopped raining."

They immediately turned around and descended the steps to the sidewalk. Michael kept the umbrella open—if it started raining again he could be ruined. He scanned the line of approaching people on the sidewalk and was relieved to see no one

appeared to be a threat attacking him. When he walked the streets with a companion, he found that people left him alone. He hoped Doppelmann didn't notice his slight limp. Nearby fried food sizzled in steam and smoke that floated by in clouds shaped like ghosts of animals. His stomach growled, but it was covered by the squealing wheels of an approaching bus.

“What a delight to receive your letter. It's not too often I get asked questions by an admirer. Usually they are from journalists who want to interrogate me and box me in to some art movement. They expect that I'm working within some framework of ideology, so I don't talk to them. You aren't a journalist, are you?” Here Doppelmann flapped up Michael's tie, as if his tongue was hanging out.

‘I'm a bookkeeper,’ Michael said. Did Doppelmann not notice that Michael looked different, that his face was frozen into one plain expression, a mask, that his eyes were begging forgiveness for embarrassing Doppelmann in public as his companion?

“How can you do that? Looking at all those numbers.”

‘Sometimes I help them save money.’ Michael decided either Doppelmann did not notice he was made of paper, perhaps because of the overcast sky, perhaps because of the darkness of the umbrella over his head, or even more thrilling, that he did not care.

“You probably see sensitive information.”

‘I do indeed,’ Michael said. He tried to loosen his stiff stance. Doppelmann seemed deep in thought.

“Good to know. So what was it, then, that prompted you to write? You said you liked the piece *The City*.”

They were now at the corner of an intersection. In the distance Michael could see the bay water and a boat slowly moving away from the city, a cloud of steam above it.

Michael tried to think of what to say about that first painting of Doppelmann's he had seen. He wanted to sound informed and original in his thinking. 'I think its sleekness, how it wasn't like a painting at all, is what caught my eye.' He was surprised at this coming out of his mouth—it sounded professional.

"Correct," Doppelmann said. He put his hand on Michael's shoulder as they waited for the street light to change. "I used the microcosm of a microchip to illustrate the workings of a city."

'Fascinating,' Michael said, and for a moment they looked each other in the eyes. He couldn't tell if Doppelmann was staring at him, or through him, for his eyes were so intense and busy he could have been thinking other things.

They crossed the street. Michael had no idea where they were headed, but he went along for the walk. For a moment he was afraid, since Doppelmann had stepped into the street before the light had changed, but he, along with several others, had followed him. Doppelmann moved like a natural leader. They passed another food vendor selling bright fruits, skinned and raw, the burst of citrus scent surrounding them. He had the urge to abandon the umbrella, but it belonged to Maiko, and she would ask for it later.

"The funny thing on that piece," Doppelmann continued, "is that I started with something completely different. A field, green, with piles of stones. The piles grew and shrank. The tips of the grasses, yellow. The sky was overtaken, the stone piles multiplied,

the tips became lines. Can you imagine, starting with a field and ending with a circuit board? By distorting the image, I came back to a recording of the image.”

‘It’s amazing,’ Michael said, but he was only amazed that he was doing this, talking with an artist as if he, Michael, knew much about art. Doppelmann would surely laugh if he saw any of the drawings Michael sketched in the back of the extra general journals. How could he bring up the other painting? He only wanted to know if it was based on a real person.

Doppelmann continued discussing the circuit board painting as they turned another corner. They were now on the other side of the United Neighborhoods building. More people were on the sidewalks now, carrying plastic bags of food. The misty breeze from passing cars made the bags hiss like snakes. Michael clutched the umbrella as the wind tried to tug it free. They climbed the steps again and stood under an olive tree in the park square.

“Nothing is more beautiful to me than scaffolding surrounding a building under construction.” Doppelmann pointed in the distance to an old brick building surrounded by scaffolding with workers, small as ants, scurrying about. “The coming into being of things, it’s so lovely.” He glanced at Michael. “You’re losing interest,” he said. “I’ve gone on too long. I apologize.”

‘Not at all,’ Michael said. ‘Perhaps you could tell me about another painting. The Mischa painting.’

“Ah, yes,” Doppelmann said, combing his hair back. Michael realized how handsome Doppelmann actually was. “That painting is one of my favorites. To capture

the look of loss and desperation, a begging for hope. It was quite intense for me to paint that. To have worked in the abstract for so long, to suddenly switch to the real was like seeing the world in a whole new way. I thought that way was dead, long dead since the arrival of photography. But no, the rawness of it all can still be captured, even in the slowness of painting.”

‘Was it based on anyone in particular?’ Michael asked.

“Why, every young woman today has that look, whether expressed outside her body, or kept inside. The look of pleading for help, for reassurance that life is worth living, can be found in every naive girl who has tried to love.”

‘But was the portrait based on a real girl?’

“Portrait?”

‘It is a portrait, right?’ Michael thought he had said something wrong.

Doppelmann seemed perplexed.

“I do not understand where this question is going.”

‘Mischa,’ Michael said. ‘Is she a real person? Or did you make her up?’

“She’s real,” he said. “Very real.”

‘It must have been hard for her to appear so revealing to someone, an artist especially.’

“She didn’t even know she had done that. She didn’t know that the look was captured in my mind. I didn’t steal it from her. I simply transposed it.”

“Has she seen it? I mean, does she live in the city?”

“Why are you so interested in the source of this painting?” Doppelmann asked. He tilted his head, studying Michael, who scratched behind his ear.

He didn’t know what to say.

‘She looked familiar,’ Michael said. ‘I thought I knew her, but I wasn’t sure it was the same girl.’

“She lives here,” Doppelmann said, and waved out at the city, the expanse of the city surrounding them. “She works as an art model.”

Michael tightened his grip on the briefcase handle. The pressure was too much, for the briefcase was old, and it burst open, the letter flapping out, only to be swept by the wind. Doppelmann watched it fly away as Michael scrambled to latch the case closed.

‘Never mind that.’ But inside he was burning to run after it. The paper letter had been like a cousin to his paper body, and now it was gone. ‘Regarding Mischa, I would love to meet her, and see if she is the same girl from high school,’ Michael said. ‘Old friends, you see. Do you know where she went to school?’

“I wouldn’t know,” Doppelmann said.

‘Is there a way I could contact her?’ Michael wasn’t sure if this was working. If he could link his past to his present in the city, he truly thought she could help him leave. Looking around them he felt the city was pressing itself upon him, trying to force him to break.

Doppelmann stared at him again, or through him, and Michael was frightened that he was discovering things inside his brain that manifested themselves on his face. But

then he remembered his face was covered by a paper mask, and that there could not be much emotion to read.

‘I had something else to ask you. There’s a new exhibit opening next week in the museum. I was wondering if you had any interest in going to it. You could shed much more light on the pieces, more than I would ever know.’

Doppelmann thought for a moment, smiled, and said: “I’d be delighted. I don’t get out often to see other art. I’m usually in my dark studio, which this place,” and here he waved at the diamond building, “wants me to pay some rent. It will be nice to get out, like today. Even if it rains a bit.”

‘That would be wonderful,’ Michael said.

“And perhaps you could do me a favor.”

‘Anything,’ Michael said.

“I’d be interested in any documents you have from your bookkeeping work. They could be useful for an art project I’m working on.”

‘I don’t know if I could take anything.’

“Just an example. There has to be some papers they wouldn’t mind leaving for a bit. Like a library—I just want to borrow them, and then you could put them back.”

Michael considered. He didn’t know what Doppelmann was up to, and he wanted to trust him, yet it was a strange request.

“I could see,” Doppelmann began, after hesitating, “if Mischa would join us.”

‘You know her still?’

“Yes, very well. She likes new things. She probably could go along with us, and you could see your old friend.”

‘Thank you!’ Michael said, and then covered his mouth for fear he had spoken too loud and showed too much enthusiasm. Doppelmann shook his hand, and they agreed to meet at the diner outside the museum the following Saturday. Michael said he would try to find some papers for Doppelmann.

And then, as he turned to leave, Doppelmann bit one of his nails and spit it on the ground. Michael stepped back, aghast.

“Always leave a piece of yourself wherever you go,” Doppelmann said, and winked. He descended the stairs, a slim, fit strip of human in dark clothes scissoring down the steps.

## **CHAPTER 19**

He arrived early at the diner. A crowd of people blocked the entrance, so after putting his name in at the front, he did a quick review of the faces to see if any of them belonged to Doppelmann or Mischa. The city had so many different types of people. Here were families with grandparents and young grandchildren, teenagers smoking cigarettes, a few businessmen in suits and ties, and people his age who were dressed in tighter clothes and brighter colors than he had ever seen before. Across the street was the museum, a large church-like structure with an obelisk-shaped atrium, where more varieties of people were streaming in. There were thin people, short people, round people, overdressed people, but no one made of paper.

A few glanced at him, perhaps wondering if he was the someone they were waiting to join their group. He touched the forehead of his mask and he directed his gaze to the sidewalk, which was scuffed with stains of smashed berries from the thin trees that lined the walkway. Any time he was alone he felt vulnerable. Someone laughed and his eyes snapped up. Was he the source of humor? It was only a girl listening to a guy imitating, in an exaggerated way, the voice of someone else.

Michael imagined the possibilities with Mischa. He saw them eating lunch slowly, his speech confident and relaxed about the things they still had in common, his imitation of the voice of their high school literature teacher, her laugh like the girl outside the diner, her apology for not keeping in touch, his deeply moving confession that he had long hoped for this day, his suggestion that they meet again soon, then his question of her help to get him out of the city, and perhaps her willingness to join. All week he had feared the worst, that Mischa wouldn't show, or she would be disgusted by his paper body, or she would be the wrong Mischa. Now that all those thoughts had cycled through him, he was empty and ready to be filled with imagined confidence.

More people arrived and formed a loose line behind Michael. He was becoming part of the crowd. Each time someone walked by, he looked up from the smashed berries to see if it was her. As the minutes passed, he scratched at his yarn hair and checked his pockets for scraps of paper and money to ensure they were still there. His shoulders slumped, and in the smashed berries he started to see constellations that spelled out how much of a failure he was. A flyer, perhaps belonging to Adam's Bookkeeping Company, blew by in the gutter; he wanted it to take him away.

But then the crowd parted and Doppelmann appeared, his hand linked to a woman's elbow behind him. Michael's heart nearly stopped.

"Michael," Doppelmann said. "Say hello to Mischa."

She was not the same woman in the painting. Not at first glance. While the woman in the painting had short brown hair, this woman had long, wavy black hair. Her eyes were darker and shined. She had the faintest creases from her nose to the corners of

her lips. Everyone around them looked at her, not because she was exceptionally beautiful, but because she projected a presence that alerted people that someone different had arrived. Her arms, exposed in an olive tank top, were tan and sinewy. He mentally projected the image of the portrait onto her face and looked for the overlaps. Yes, there were similarities, but the desperation was gone, the near defeat of optimism missing. This woman appeared to have survived whatever it was at the time of the portrait. She tilted her head, not sure how to take in Michael's staring.

'It's a pleasure to meet you again,' Michael said. He caught himself taking on a formal voice, so he gently shook his head to clear the voice from his brain. He tried again, more casually: 'Can you believe how we are meeting? Through Doppelmann's painting.'

"Oh that thing. I can't believe that was me. I don't really like that piece."

Doppelmann, who was taller than her, put his hands on her shoulders.

"She doesn't like to be reminded of herself back then. I think it's lovely, though. It says so much, not just about her, but about a generation."

Doppelmann's fingers, thick and stiff, pressed into Mischa's shoulders. The door to the diner opened and the hostess announced Michael's name.

'That's us. Let's eat, shall we?' Michael let them walk before him. He watched Mischa's walk, nothing spectacular, just simple steps toward the door, which Doppelmann held open for her. Yet everyone watched her as she entered, as if she were a celebrity. Michael hurried after them, glad they did not see his uneven walk. On his way he broke the strands of a spiderweb.

Inside, they sat in a booth, Mischa and Doppelmann on one side, and Michael on the other. Michael had to avoid a sticky spot on his seat, so he crammed himself closer to the wall. He asked for a towel from the waitress, who forgot and never brought it. He instantly closed up, his elbows pinned to his sides and his shoulders slumped forward. Behind them, another booth was full of large men who worked in construction. They reminded him of his past and his brothers. Each time they shifted around it jolted all the booths, forcing Michael forward to knock knees with his guests.

“Michael says you went to school together,” Doppelmann said. Mischa squinted and stared at Michael, analyzing him, probably superimposing images of other young men she once knew. Satisfied, she turned to Doppelmann.

“Yes, he was a good friend,” she said. This made Michael want to smile. “But what happened to you?”

His hands were patting his mask again before he knew it. This had become a reflex since he had started wearing it. How quickly new habits can be formed, he thought. Luckily the lighting in the diner was dim and she had not looked repulsed when staring at him.

‘I was in an accident,’ he said. So much more was on the tip of his tongue. He pictured his tongue like an abstract painting, with tints of different colors in different regions, some deep red and dark blue, a tint of pink, a zigzag of black. He thought it might all pour out, but then the waitress arrived with a pencil and paper pad ready for writing. ‘It was after you left,’ he simply said.

“Would you like anything to drink?” the waitress asked Mischa.

“Two glasses of water, please,” Mischa said.

Michael’s jaw slightly dropped. ‘You must be thirsty.’

“It’s not that. I like to have a backup plan.”

Doppelmann ordered milk and Michael ordered orange juice and reminded the waitress he needed a towel.

“Where we lived, we called you Michael,” Mischa said, “but your name was really Michelangelo.”

“Ha!” Doppelmann slapped the table and the knives clinked with the forks and spoons. “Is that your full name?”

‘Yes, but I never go by that,’ Michael said, and grabbed his spoon, which had nearly rattled off the table. He hadn’t heard that name in a long time. It didn’t even feel like it belonged to him. It had never been him.

Was that what she remembered the most about him? Not the time she tore up his essay for school? The hours they spent in her bedroom, talking about the books they had read? Or the games she played to make him find one of her poems hidden in the school library? She had seemed so sweet and energetic then. Was this really the same person?

“I won’t call you that again,” she said. If she sensed his discomfort, he was grateful. “We’re different people now. So when did you move here?”

‘Just over a month ago,’ he said. He didn’t want to talk about himself. He wanted to hear her apologize for running away ten years ago so that he could move on to lighter topics, and imitate their literature teacher’s voice so he could hear her laugh. That had

been the plan. Instead he found himself imitating her questions: ‘When did you move here?’

Doppelmann laughed at this, and Mischa glanced at him with a knowing look. The way they stared at each other, and the touches from Doppelmann’s hands, made Michael turn away. It seemed impolite to watch this secret language they had. He tried to imagine himself as Doppelmann. What if he was the one touching Mischa’s shoulders, squeezing her closer and brushing her hair? He could be the one who was an artist, a slim but solid streak of human skin next to her.

“I’ve been in the city too long,” she said. “But I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. Not inland, not north. This is where I should be.”

‘I feel the same way,’ Michael said, and relaxed his shoulders. The idea of leaving now vanished. They had a connection now, and that was enough to start.

They ordered their food and Mischa ordered two coffees. Michael ordered a bowl of shredded napkins soaked in milk. Doppelmann told many stories. He rambled on about his paintings he was working on, and Michael tried to listen but lost his concentration. He was captivated by Mischa’s hands, her fingers lifting a spoon to stir sugar in her coffee and wrapping around the handle of the ceramic cup, and the flex of her arm as she pulled it closer to her lips. They were the same lips from the painting. Of course it made sense now to him. That painting had been one possibility of her. She didn’t need help anymore. She was fine on her own, or with Doppelmann. She was watching him, causing him to shift in his seat and touch the sticky spot next to his leg. He removed an ice cube from his

juice with a fork and rubbed it on the vinyl to erase the spot. Underneath his clothes his dented body jerked suddenly from leaning over too much.

‘I only look this way because there was a storm, and I can’t really be out in the rain,’ he said to her. ‘I used to not need a mask.’

“Be careful in this neighborhood,” Doppelmann said. “They don’t like people who look different.”

‘I seem to be okay as long as I have company,’ Michael said, looking to both of them for a sign of reassurance they would protect him. They simply stared back at him.

“Let me feel,” Mischa finally said, and her hand, the fingers that lifted the spoon to stir sugar, stroked his cheek and brushed across the bridge of his nose. Doppelmann stopped talking and they all sat there while Mischa’s hand moved to Michael’s mouth. Her thumb plucked his lower lip. Then the hand was gone and Michael snapped his loose jaw shut.

“This is unlike anyone I’ve ever known,” she said. “May I ask—do you have more hair?”

‘More hair? Where?’ Michael asked, touching his head. She broke into laughter.

“Darling,” Doppelmann said. “Leave the boy alone!” He gave an apologetic look to Michael. “As I was saying,” he continued, and discussed the benefits of horsehair brushes.

She began to take more of an interest in him, it seemed, so he sat up straighter. The dents on his right side were the worst, but by casually leaning against the wall, there was less pressure on his distorted body. The men in the booth behind them were loud and

complained about their orders to each other. One of them grunted and then Michael was thrust forward again as the guy behind him got out. He bumped knees with Doppelmann, whose eyebrows jumped in surprise.

“What are you doing down there?” he asked, followed by an authentic laugh.

‘Sorry about that.’ Michael imitated his laugh.

Doppelmann spoke of a trip that he and Mischa took to a tropical island. Michael watched Mischa as the story was told. Often she looked at the empty plates of food, only to shoot a glance at Michael. She played with a wrapper for the straw to Michael’s orange juice. She rolled it up, unrolled it, then folded the paper and finally crushed it into a ball and tossed it on the floor.

“It’s just paper,” she said. She looked at him again to see if he noticed and then smirked.

“Let me pay the chit and then we’ll be off to the museum.” Doppelmann stood up.

‘That’s so kind,’ Michael said. ‘May I give you some money?’

“Nonsense. You get it next time,” he said, and rushed off to the register. Michael was pleased. They seemed to like him and had implied they would hang out with him again. Mischa looked over her shoulder as Doppelmann walked away.

“A lot of us were mean to you back then,” she said. “But that was many years ago. That was another life for me, inland.”

‘You were never mean to me. As for the others, no one knew better. Is life that much different for you now?’ Michael asked.

“You know how it is,” she said. “You live in a situation you have no control over. Then, one day you decide to leave. And you never look back. Then you can be whoever you want to be. Start over as many times as you need.”

‘I know exactly what you mean,’ he said.

She was a delight and he wanted to savor all of this: the words, the connection to their forgotten pasts, she alone on her side, he on his. ‘Maybe you and I can meet soon. Catch up on old times,’ he said. ‘In fact, I was hoping to get your help with something.’

He couldn’t believe he said this. It just came out. She glanced at the register. They both watched Doppelmann remove his wallet from his back pocket, pick through the folded money, and select a bill. Michael waited for her response. Doppelmann swiped his index finger in his nose and then slid his finger across the counter. Leaving a piece of himself, Michael thought.

“I can’t this week,” she said.

‘Of course, no rush,’ he said.

She pulled a napkin from the dispenser and brought out a pen from her small purse. “Do you still like poetry?”

‘I do,’ he said.

“Do you remember my box of poems?”

‘I remember,’ he said. He thought of the time they were on her bed and she poured the box of poems on him, and he read each one and stacked them neatly at the foot of the bed. ‘You used napkins and receipts, often stained with coffee.’

“And you didn’t drink coffee. Only juice.” She nodded to his glass of juice and then scribbled down words on the napkin as Doppelmann returned.

“Everyone ready for some art?” he said. He stood before their table like the monument he was, or wanted to be. Michael stood up and noticed they were the same height. Doppelmann had seemed taller the first time they had met. “Mischa? Ready?”

She finished scribbling on the napkin, then handed it to Michael.

“I wrote a poem for Michael.”

“Excellent, dear,” Doppelmann said, and draped his arm over her shoulders. “You write excellent poetry.”

Michael glanced back at the men in the booth behind them. They were beefy and packed in the booth like canned anchovies. One of them snorted. Michael brushed at his yarn hair, scurried to join Doppelmann and Mischa, and then, as they approached the door, the glass door with the sign that said THANK YOU PLEASE COME AGAIN, he unfolded the napkin in his hands.

The paper was dry and coarse. Written in ink, slanting to the right, was the first poem of Mischa’s he had read in ten years. He read it several times over as they walked across the street:

*Why  
oh why  
did he serve us  
cubism on rye?  
Now we must lie.*

He crumbled the poem and he ate it. He put it in his mouth and swallowed it, a small, white, paper capsule. Any other time he would have saved it. For such a thing deserved to be remembered, but if Doppelmann asked to read it, there would be too many questions, and he wanted this to be a secret. So he ate it, made it a part of his paper body, and breathed quickly to calm his fast, beating heart.