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Seeking Brilliant Individuals

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SEEKING BRILLIANT INDIVIDUALS

A Novel By
Nick Romeo
B. A., Northwestern University, 2006

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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of the requirements for the degree of
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Department of English
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This thesis entitled:

SEEKING BRILLIANT INDIVIDUALS
written by Nick Romeo

has been approved for the Department of English

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Ruth Ellen Kocher

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Stephen Graham Jones

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards Of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

Date ___ April 20, 2012
ORIGINAL QUERY: Before the recent financial crisis, many hedge funds felt bold enough to do the unthinkable: hire people with English degrees. As one such hire, I became a first-hand witness to a lavish lifestyle that I didn't think existed outside of Tom Wolfe novels. Do financiers really spend $600 on a pair of socks? Would they really fire an assistant for placing a pen in the wrong spot on their desk? The answer is yes, all this ... and much more.

I am seeking representation for my comic literary novel, Seeking Brilliant Individuals (66,000 words). It is the story of a young Ivy League graduate who comes to New York City with two goals: to write a great book and to have sex with beautiful women. With the confidence typical of his generation, he's convinced that he'll easily accomplish both ... but a few months later he's celibate, penniless, and on the brink of starvation. Salvation comes in the form of a mysterious job offer from one of the world's largest hedge funds. The money is too good to refuse, and even young Bohemians need to pay the rent.

He expects to join an elite fraternity of brilliant analysts solving cutting-edge problems and trading quips over frothy mugs of beer after work. But instead he finds himself employed as a glorified personal assistant, navigating a series of meaningless and seemingly impossible tasks. It seems, in fact, that his job consists primarily of a doomed quest to satisfy an eccentric billionaire's demands for perfect order in every aspect of his life. If the soap isn't set at a ninety degree angle on the bathroom sink, his job is in danger.

Moving between the worlds of Manhattan's Bohemian twenty-somethings and the lavish lifestyle of one of its wealthiest families, the novel hinges on a series of comic collisions between fantasy and reality. The eccentric billionaire's fantasy of order and control is constantly undermined by the blunders of his staff ... and eventually by the crash of the market itself. The narrator's dreams of great prose and greater sex prove hard to fulfill, and his acquisition of sudden wealth prompts a whole new set of fantasies that don't quite work out. The novel presents a uniquely modern spin on the "sentimental education" genre, in which despite ample opportunities for education, our young protagonist doesn't end up learning much at all.
SYNOPSIS: Seeking Brilliant Individuals begins with the arrival of a young Ivy League graduate to New York City. He has two goals: to write a great book and to have sex with beautiful women. But he quickly realizes that to achieve either goal he’ll first need to do something more prosaic: get a job. He stumbles on a hedge fund’s classified ad that uses the catchphrase “Seeking Brilliant Individuals.” Unable to resist thinking of himself as brilliant, he applies for and wins the job after enduring a bizarre and exhausting series of interviews in which, somewhat oddly, financial matters are never mentioned.

At the firm of Hamilton & Company, he stumbles into one of corporate America’s best kept secrets: an elite “consulting” team of Ivy League graduates paid vast sums of money to cater to the extravagant whims of an eccentric billionaire. PhDs design intricate systems to ensure that Mr. Hamilton receives a designated number of organic baby carrots at a certain time each morning. And that’s not even the worst of it.

The narrator soon finds that despite Mr. Hamilton’s mania for perfect control, he and the other consultants are perpetually failing to provide the absolute order Hamilton expects. After botching several key projects, the narrator seems on the verge of losing the job. Successfully completing a shady assignment involving the acquisition of an already occupied apartment is his last hope if he wants to remain employed.

Just as Hamilton makes a fetish of order, the narrator begins to romanticize disorder and chaos. He uses his newfound wealth to fuel a spree of drinking and whoring, convinced that these are essential activities that a young artist must experience. His quest for experience also leads to a doomed courtship of a sullen young bartender he decides is the embodiment of female perfection.

Hamilton’s impossible quest for perfect order and control is ultimately undermined by the crash of global financial markets, while the narrator’s quixotic pursuit of chaotic experience fails to yield the artistic epiphanies he had expected. The novel offers a timely critique of excess in the financial world, an acute sociological portrait of Manhattan’s bohemian twenty-somethings, and insights into the unexpected links between these two realms. Frustrating the conventions of the sentimental education genre, the story ends with the narrator in exactly the same predicament that began the novel; he’s broke, aimless, and dreaming of the future.
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CHAPTER 1

We came to New York City expecting great things. We saw ourselves lounging at chic cafes, seducing beautiful girls with our casual brilliance, gesturing while we spoke. We saw long afternoon chess matches, maybe an imposing German novel resting on the cafe table, definitely a sexually adventurous young mistress hanging on our every word, sipping her espresso.

We arrived with minimal savings and a very partial understanding of the subway system. It seemed like our entire graduating class was migrating to Manhattan, exchanging dorm-rooms for studios in the village or two-bedrooms uptown. There were certain vague promises of parental support, but most of us needed jobs.

I only had money to live for thirty days. The prospect of checks from elderly relatives for my 24th birthday shimmered like a distant island I would drown before reaching.

I lived with a painter and a photographer, both college friends. The beauty of two roommates was always having two possible culprits when food went missing. My meals were bits of lettuce, crackers, spoonfuls of yogurt, swigs of orange juice, maybe some chips. We had a loose food-sharing agreement in the apartment, but I felt my destitution was grounds for exemption from the sharing part of the agreement. I helped myself to whatever was left on the increasingly desolate shelves of the fridge and cupboards. I poached artfully, nibbling small amounts of a large number of items so that no huge absences were noticeable, just a general minute depletion.

I had to find work. I knew I had to find work. But college had accustomed me to a certain way of life. So instead of looking for work I spent my days reading poems, strolling down the leafy lanes of Central Park, getting a coffee and scone with marmalade, looking at art in the museums. I wandered the city with a pen and notepad, convinced the muse might strike at any moment. I was used to writing papers at the last minute, sequestering myself in a forsaken corner of the campus library, feeling the adrenaline rush of the looming deadline. I figured finding a means of subsistence at the last possible minute was like writing a paper, just with higher stakes.

I was also kind of excited by the prospect of imminent poverty. It felt like I was approaching some distant country on a long overseas flight. I figured once I got there I could snap some pictures with the locals, take in some of the sights and hop a flight back. I arrived one July morning when I went to the bank and found out I had $16.00 left in my account. Somehow I’d been expecting a much larger figure. I left the bank and bought a jar of peanut butter and a loaf of whole wheat bread and hid them in my dresser, next to the white socks and plaid boxers.

After forcing down a few sticky bites I abandoned the bread and peanut butter and took the train to a neighborhood on the East Side. I spent the next few hours nibbling samples of imported cheeses, sipping cherry and rose-petal flavors of sparkling sodas from miniature cups, lurking by olive bars and tasting various flavors of gelato. So much for my voyage to the land of the poor.
I started walking to Midtown, hoping I’d stumble on more stores with samples. The regularity of hunger was kind of alarming. As soon as I’d managed to feed myself I already needed a new way to get a meal. It reminded me of being a kid in the ocean and realizing the terrible regularity of the waves, surfacing from the foam only to see the next wave bearing down and knowing that an infinite number of waves was rolling toward me. I used to pretend the waves were soldiers from a vast army trying to destroy the world, which had wisely selected me as its defender. I’d slay wave after wave and watch their defeated forms trickle toward the beach before charging into frothy combat with the next soldier. But eventually I always faltered, two waves came in quick succession or a giant one sent me spinning underwater and I started sputtering and flailing, glorious in my demise. Either a concerned parent would pluck me from the sea or I’d resign myself to the inevitability of defeat and make my way to shore, disappointed by the death of the world but proud I’d fought so well. By the time I was old and large enough to defeat the army of waves the game had lost interest, replaced by the comparative study of bikinis.

At Bryant Park I found a bench and sat down. At the west end of 42nd Street I saw the sun setting over the Hudson. The park was covered in a ragged twilight. I picked up a copy of the NY Times someone had left on a nearby table and started leafing through the classifieds. The heat lingered in the park long after the light faded and I sat in the hot dusk half-heartedly scanning the columns of ads. Nothing looked too promising.

I wanted an employer who paid me lavishly to do very little except think highly of myself. This was one of my great skills, the capacity to think well of myself whatever the evidence to the contrary. I flashed on a generic image of a job interview room, an imposing man in a suit frowning over my resume, then glancing up to ask me: "And what will you bring to this position?"
"My unfaltering egotism, sir."

The problem was that none of the postings were for jobs I’d be able to get an interview for: Junior Account Executive, minimum two years experience. Senior Systems Analyst, data processing and project coordinator. I imagined two balding men in suits having a conversation with words drawn from the job listings:
"How’s the entry-level coordinating?"
"You know, it’s a facilitation process."
"Well be sure the project systems are executed in the junior account before the analysis of senior data."

I kept scanning the ads, my stomach churning with hunger. The language in most of them somehow managed to be both meaningless and impressive. Perhaps I could learn from this in my own writing. I was about to toss the paper when I saw a listing that caught my eye:

Seeking brilliant individuals: Perfect job for artists and writers. Elite hedge fund seeks brilliant individuals from all fields to join our team. Call or email to apply.

I was instantly intrigued, though I had no clue what a hedge fund was. The ad did a good job of flattering that great majority who consider themselves part of an elite minority. We few, we happy few. I ran through the obvious connotations of the word hedge and decided that gambling
was more likely than gardening. Gamblers hedged their bets. Gardeners trimmed their hedges. This was all the light my brilliance could shine on the topic of hedge funds. But they specifically courted artists and writers, and they seemed to think brilliance was a sufficient qualification. I tore the listing from the paper and began the long walk home.
CHAPTER 2

The next day I was feeling confident. So instead of actually applying for the job, I went back to the East Side. I wanted to try something.

I found a vaguely French-seeming cafe in the east 70s and looked through the windows. I counted maybe a dozen pressed polo shirts and plaid shorts, young lordly types sipping their iced teas, waiters with the look of beaten children trying to please their parents. It seemed like the sort of place where people know what the word sommelier means. I pushed open the door, doing my best to look as if I'd just rolled out of the canopied bed in my Park Avenue penthouse to grace the cafe with my presence.

The atmosphere was hushed, people conferring rather than talking. As I walked in a few pairs of bored eyes scanned me quickly, as if assessing and dismissing a garment on the clearance rack. A young waitress showed me to a small table with a white tablecloth that was still warm and fresh from a dryer. I opened the leather-bound menu and avoided eye contact with the busboy who poured me a glass of water. Usually I was all egalitarian friendliness with waiters and busboys, trying to erase the class envy with my winning smile. But this called for something different. I scanned the items on the menu and noticed a great number I couldn't pronounce. This seemed promising. The font was a cursive so elaborate I briefly thought it might be Arabic. Prices of the various items were listed in a small embarrassed font that hovered at the edge of the page, as if the presence of prices were a regrettable but necessary indiscretion. The waiters seemed to feel the same way about their presence. They lurked at the edges of the dining room, apologetic and solicitous.

After a few moments a waiter brought a small basket of hot white bread to the table and I took a bite from the soft, yielding crust. I settled on a $32 dollar omelet as a pronounceable option. When I glanced up from the menu to catch the waiter's eye he was already striding toward me. After I ordered I noticed that the slightest motions of the customers elicited an instant response from the staff. One man in a white summer suit merely raised his eyebrows and a waiter glided over with the check. I ate my way through the free bread, more out of habit than desire, and leaned back to wait. A few times I accidentally caught the waiter's eye and he appeared by the table asking if I needed anything. It was nice having your own sense of self-importance shared by those around you. Maybe this was why so many of my peers went into finance - so they could summon waiters with their eyebrows. Someone in college once told me he wanted to go into investment banking because of the movie American Psycho. My memory of the movie involved decapitations, chainsaws. He told me it wasn't so much the serial murders as the "lifestyle" that appealed to him.

I was trying to recall whether Fenelon was a figure I'd read about in European history or an edible plant that would be in my omelet when it arrived. There was none of the grease or glisten of the omelets I got at diners by my apartment in Harlem. The customary heap of "home fries" was
replaced by a smattering of browned potato chunks that smelled faintly of olive oil and pepper rather than grease and meat. The omelet was stuffed with fresh spinach and feta cheese. I took a bite and sighed. It was like kissing a pretty girl you pretend to despise because you were never able to interest her. I wanted to despise the omelet, but it was too good. I had a fleeting vision of myself as a gourmand sampling the finest restaurants in Manhattan, warmly greeting the maitre'd, Pierre, at a cozy, candle-lit bistro, suggesting the snails to my eager young date. Then I recalled the six dollars in my pocket.

I had a few more lingering bites and then ran my hands through my hair, plucking out a few dark strands and casually dropping my hand beside my plate. The vigilance of the wait staff made the next part tricky. I waited until their attentive eyes were otherwise occupied and slid two hairs into the exposed center of the omelet. Then, with all the outrage I could summon, I waved down a waiter and pointed at the hair. I could do an excellent discerning snob face, puckering my lips and wrinkling my nose and sniffing like the breeze carried a distant scent of shit that offended my aristocratic nostrils.

"Oh dear, I'm very sorry, sir."

I continued looking outraged, then shifted slowly to a look of disgust.

"This is unacceptable!"

"Sir, I do apologize. This is very rare. Of course we will not charge you for the omelet. Is there something else I could bring you?"

That was my cue to exit.

"Thank you, but no."

I pushed the chair back from the table and stood up too rapidly, knocking the chair backward on its rear legs. It hovered for a moment, poised between two outcomes, then toppled onto the marble floor with a loud clatter. Gazes turned toward me from around the cafe, the hushed voices grew quiet and the other waiters also looked at me, expecting some dreadful climax. I couldn't resist the chance:

"Next time, do not overcook the Fenelon!"

I stormed out the door.

I couldn't quite believe what had happened. To be more precise, I couldn't quite believe what I'd done. I stood blinking in the sunlight outside the cafe for a moment and then walked downtown toward the public library. When I got there I sat down at a table in Bryant Park and dozed off in the sun. I woke a few hours later, feeling vaguely guilty for what I'd done and vaguely homeless for falling asleep in a park. I noticed with mild alarm that I was hungry again. I wondered at how many restaurants I could repeat my scheme before I'd plucked all the hairs from my head. Would I run out of hairs or restaurants first?

I decided to ignore my hunger and try writing. In a none-too-subtle transference I found myself writing about the Great Depression, dusty little men in long soup lines, hungry babies shrieking in squalid tenements. I gave up after a few pages.

I started writing about something imagined again but then veered off into my own past in the same way you try but fail to avoid talking with people you already know at a party. Unfortunately there wasn't always much to say to the people you didn't know, and I didn't know a thing about
the (real) Great Depression. My writing always tended to wander back to myself, just as eventually I wound up talking to the set of friends I came with to the party, despising them for their familiarity but aware that anything else would probably fail.

Trapped between boredom with my past and ignorance of almost everything else, I assumed my present life would eventually furnish me with a rich supply of adventures and wisdom, particularly if I remained daringly below the poverty line and started having more sex. But the thought of the hidden meal of bread and peanut butter that awaited me uptown made my confidence start to waver, just as my lips would turn blue and my resolution weaken as an endless procession of waves pummeled me on those distant beach days. I needed that job.
CHAPTER 3

I really didn't know how to do anything. I’d majored in English and Philosophy. I could read and write about books, but no one would pay me to do that. In fact I’d paid a university far too much money to let me read and write about books. There was always menial work, but even to make sandwiches you needed previous "experience" and references. I couldn't bring myself to walk into the espresso bars and pastry shops. For four years I’d been the one eating pastries and sipping lattes, not serving them. Surely things couldn’t have changed so fast.

I’d been figuring that something would work out. I would meet an attractive older woman eager to feed and fuck a young artist. A maternal great-uncle would remember me in his will. Anything too particular started to seem improbable. The power of the phrase was its vagueness: something would work out.

My roommates also thought something would work out. None of us said it, but we all thought it. We were the chosen ones.

We’d come to New York hoping to do two things: make art and get laid. And it seemed one might lead to the other.

The photographer was always accosting beautiful women on the street, in cafes and bookstores, running after them with his leather satchel slung over one shoulder, explaining with becoming shyness how he was trying to build his portfolio and he hardly ever does this sort of thing, but he just couldn't resist asking if they'd pose for a few photos because they have this really original look.

The painter would position himself in front of a Fragonard or El Greco at the Met with a pencil and a large sketchbook and wait for girls to comment on the quality of his recreation. If they were reticent, he’d wander the galleries, invariably finding himself engrossed by the same painting as any attractive girl in the vicinity.

I talked to girls at parties. The streets and subways were too risky, the odds too high that I'd be mistaken for one of the homeless or crazy who lurched about barking something garbled at the indifferent masses. Even if you were well-dressed and recently bathed, people tended to cringe when spoken to. One day I approached a woman to ask for directions only to be told 'I don't have any money' before I'd finished with 'excuse me.'

At parties it was at least theoretically acceptable to speak to other people, but in practice the results were mixed. Two days after I saw the hedge fund ad, I talked to a red-haired underwear model at a party for nearly two hours. We were standing on a fire escape looking over the Hudson. I asked her what she did. She pulled down her jeans a few inches and lifted a frilly white tank top. I gazed at the white freckled skin of her stomach and the black satin of her underwear,
waiting for some explanation, pleased at the weirdness of the moment.
"See these?"
She looked down at her underwear. I nodded.
"These are my underwear."
"Yes, right."
"I let men take pictures of me wearing only my underwear and get paid for it."
I nodded again.
"That is quite remarkable."
We stood looking out at the lights reflected in the dark water, sipping Belgian beer from long-necked bottles. I couldn't believe my good fortune. I also couldn't let her meet the photographer, who was in one of the rooms behind us. She stood gazing at the water, waiting to be spoken to. So I kept asking her questions, in a general order of decreasing importance. I asked about her hometown, her apartment, her favorite TV shows, anything to keep her there. Each question was a small invisible rope flung around her. I felt like a Liliputian trying to capture a much more attractive, female Gulliver. She didn't ask any questions, just stood and answered them like a benevolent celebrity willing to stop and humor a doltish fan. It seemed her interest in the situation was barely strong enough to answer questions but not sufficient to generate any in return. I began to focus less on the conversation and instead imagined its possible outcomes, such as nibbling the red-head's ear or kissing her smooth pale stomach. As my fantasies increased in intricacy and lewdness their prospect of realization dimmed even further. The gossamer ropes of my questions began to snap and fray. She was on the point of vanishing, probably into the arms of my roommate, who would make her cry out in ecstasy all night in the room adjacent to mine. "So back to this underwear modeling."
Silence.
"I bet you're good at what you do."
More silence. A tall dark-haired guy in tan slacks and a blue blazer stepped out on the fire escape next to us.
"I'm Jason," he shook our hands. I instantly began picturing him falling off the fire escape.
"I feel absurdly over-dressed, but a work meeting ran late."
She turned toward him.
"Where do you work?"
"Oh, I'm with Morgan Stanley."
I'd never heard a waiter say he was “with” a restaurant, why were bankers with their banks? She turned even further toward him. I had nothing to lose.
"I've been doing some underwear modeling myself."
They looked over at me.
"You know, men’s, women’s, just whatever helps pay the rent until they mail the book advance."
"You wear women's underwear?"
It was the first and last question she asked me.

I wandered back inside to get another beer. I surveyed the crowd. They were young, literate, massively in debt. By day they waited tables, worked at preschools, answered phones at law firms. At night their visions of their true selves emerged and bloomed like outlandish flowers. We were the Bohemian underclass, distinguished from the regular underclass by our knowledge of Proust and Picasso and from the Bohemian upper class by our dwindling savings and provisional
health insurance.

There was always a slightly panicked quality to these parties; they had the hasty feeling of a military furlough, everyone trying to feel that this was their true life, to drink and talk enough to convince themselves this was who they were before they went back to selling bagels in Brooklyn, making burritos downtown.

I felt strangely guilty for not having a degrading day job I hated, as if I lacked some essential qualification of a young aspiring artist. I hastened to assure anyone who inquired that while at the moment I was just writing, I wasn't supported by my parents and my savings were almost completely gone. This information seemed to reassure them.

I got a cold Belgian beer from a blue cooler on the kitchen floor. I took a long swallow and looked out over the Hudson, then scanned the apartment. There had to be someone here who would have sex with me. Variations of this thought were running through half a dozen male brains in the apartment. Not necessarily in explicit articulate form, but you could see it in their eyes, the way they stood and walked, something deep in the brain stem asserting its old imperative.

Fairly soon the night passed an invisible point and people started to lose interest in conversations, to calculate their commute home and the severity of their hangover in the morning. It was too late to seduce anyone. The point always arrived imperceptibly, a slackening around the edges of things, and by the time you noticed something it was irreversible, people flowing from the party in massive hemorrhages, the remaining stragglers aware of its imminent demise.

I stayed at the party long after midnight, lingering like a scavenger among its smoldering ashes, lacking the sense of urgency that drove others back to their beds to screw or sleep for a few hours before work the next day. I finally walked home along streets jammed with garbage from the strike that summer and I passed through clouds of ripe odors, scents of bananas and rotten meat and soiled diapers mingling. I decided I’d call the hedge fund the next morning.
CHAPTER 4

We liked to think we lived uptown. To most people uptown was the Upper West Side, brownstones on leafy streets, evening jogs in Riverside Park. I saw these assumptions register whenever I said I lived uptown. Men would look at me with new admiration, a new desire for friendship; women would inch closer, smiling as they sipped their drinks. When I mentioned the exact cross-street, they’d repeat what I said with a new emphasis: Uptown. Now they saw me squeezed into a working-class Hispanic tenement, street-fights in the evenings, squalling toddlers in the night. The older generation of New Yorkers’ memories of drugs and shootings were overlaid with the rumors of habitability that started in the 1990s, so impressions of the neighborhood were mixed at best.

By the time we arrived the area had just reached a point of acceptable risk. Our place was on the seventh floor of the building and at night the street noises were inescapable. The heat was suffocating if the windows were shut and if they were open the breeze carried the sounds of sirens, breaking glass, car engines and shouting like so much trash floating on a cool wave. We’d spend the nights sweating or sleepless or both, dozing off around dawn only to hear a kind of mobile apocalypse of screeching and roaring: the garbage truck. Our only recourse was to romanticize things: we tried to transmute the city into a language of artistic symbols. The flaking yellow paint in the dimly-lit hallways, the nocturnal scurrying of cockroaches, the rusty brown color of the water that spurted from the old spigot each morning, we told ourselves that each detail was part of a rich compost of experience that would nourish our art. We were already imagining ourselves looking back on this time, sipping dry martinis at gallery openings and book parties, telling charming anecdotes about the youthful poverty that inspired our early masterpieces.

I woke late the next morning with sunlight spilling over the bed like warm dirty water. My apartment was teeming with naked women. They covered the walls and ceilings, the backs of doors and sides of kitchen appliances.

The painter had taped a series of crude black-ink sketches on every available surface. In each sketch a nude woman was transfixed in some erotic pose, invariably on the brink of what appeared to be a life-changing orgasm. The men who had driven the women to such unbearable ecstasy were tactfully omitted from the drawings, so the viewer could more easily imagine himself in each one.

I wanted to go back to sleep. Then I remembered the ad from the hedge fund.

I got out of bed and listened at the doors of my roommates for any sounds of life. Nothing. They’d probably left for the day. They had slightly more savings than I did and significantly more willingness to take dull jobs to support their artistic callings. The painter was always cruising the East Village, dropping off resumes and picking up applications at any bar or cafe that
had a wait staff with enough tattoos and piercings to suggest he’d fit in. Even the photographer was dividing his time between "photo-shoots" (and recruiting attractive, female subjects for them) and seeking a part-time job.

I had a few bites of someone's leftover Chinese noodles and a swig of orange juice and sat staring at a spread-eagled female form hung on the living room wall. It wasn’t a Picasso, but it certainly held my attention for longer than many works at the Met. Still in my boxers, with most of my brain occupied by the nude sketches, I sat down on the edge of my bed to call. A female voice answered on the third ring.

"Hamilton and Co., this is Sally. How can I direct your call?"
I pictured a busty brunette bulging out of a white blouse.
"Hi, I was calling in response to an ad in the Times. I hear you're seeking brilliant people?"
This got a small but genuine laugh before she went back into a secretarial voice.
"We are certainly always interested in exceptional people. If you're interested in applying, I can give you the email address for our recruiting office. Just send them a cover letter and resume."
"And what's the usual time frame for hearing back?"
"Well, due to the high volume of applicants it could be anywhere from two weeks to a few months."
That was too long. That was far too long. I needed to keep her on the phone, to somehow shortcircuit the standard procedures.
"And is it possible to make exceptions if an applicant is approaching starvation?"
My tone was more serious than I'd intended. She seemed to take me seriously.
"I'm glad to transfer you to recruiting, maybe they can take down some preliminary information."
The hold music was the slow movement of a Mozart piano concerto. Near the end of the development section a woman named Suzy came on the line and asked me a series of questions.
She asked where I went to college, what my grade point average was, what my scores on standardized tests were, what I'd studied in college, if I'd had any prior work experience. After each response I heard the sound of typing. My answers sounded impressive, but I really had no work experience. In college I'd hung out with an aging philosophy professor twice a week and gotten paid. He'd scrounged some funds from the department and paid me to have conversations. We were supposed to be researching for a book he was writing, but we always sat and talked. I sensed the potential for embellishment here and described the experience as being a research and personal assistant for a philosophy professor.
"Can you tell me more about working as a personal assistant?"
Her tone had changed slightly. I had no idea what she wanted to hear, so I told her the truth, that I'd worked for an eccentric professor who wanted someone to talk to, someone who could organize his desk, remind him of meeting times, mark a few relevant passages from texts he lectured on. The sounds of typing lasted for longer after my answer.
"So what's your true passion? Are you an artist, a writer?"
The question seemed strangely personal while her voice stayed blandly professional. Shouldn’t we have been talking about finance or investing?
"The reason I ask is because we take a broad approach to recruiting. We'd rather hire one really brilliant English major than ten average economic majors or MBAs. So we just want to find out about what you're interested in, what you know about."
"Well, I've been reading a lot of Proust lately."
Proust was the most imposing of the authors I'd been reading during all the time I didn't spend looking for work.
"Oh? My PhD is in French literature. Which volume are you reading?"
"The second."
"Remind me, what was the name of the seaside resort the narrator visits with his grandmother?"
"Balbec."
"Of course, wonderful. And the aristocrat he meets there?"
"Saint-Loup. The one obsessed with Nietzsche."
"Yes, he’s also the one whose skull is memorably compared to an old castle with its interior converted into a library."
I happened to remember a sentence from the passage on Saint-Loup and quoted it.
"Beneath the delicate skin the bold construction, the feudal architecture were apparent."
"Very nice, do you recall the French?"
Was she serious?
"I read the translation…"
"Ah, no problem. And of course Balbec is where he meets Albertine."
We kept talking Proust for a few minutes. I had the sense she knew the answers to all the questions she asked me. But she kept asking them. Whenever I spoke she typed into the keyboard. Since she seemed to want to quiz me, I was happy to oblige. I'd always had a good verbal memory. I could quote passages from most of the novels I read and I committed most poems to memory after a few readings. This had made me somewhat of a minor celebrity among campus literary types.
"Do you write fiction or only read it?"
"I try writing now and then."
"OK, an avid reader, a possible writer. It's been lovely chatting with you. We don't usually move this fast, but if you have time we could bring you in for interviews later this week. How's Friday?"
Two days. Between samples and bread with peanut butter I could survive until Friday.
" Wonderful."
It wasn't until after we hung up that I realized I still had no idea what a hedge fund was.
CHAPTER 5

I decided to spend the next two days writing. If I might be employed soon, this could be my last chance for a while. Each day I rode the subway down to the public library on 42nd street and sat staring at a blank piece of notebook paper, hoping the muse would descend. But every few minutes I found my eyes darting away from the paper and fixing on girls reading at nearby tables.

I knew I should be writing, but every hour or so I’d walk the length of the reading room, staring at the pretty girls studying at the long wooden tables, trying to convey with suggestive glances the amazing sex we could have if only they’d forget their GMAT and LSAT prep books and sleep with a young, broke stranger.

Often I’d begin to write something only to let my mind wander into a vivid fantasy about the ecstatic reception of my writing, the thronging of fans at a signing, the strangers on trains I’d see reading my book, the gorgeous binding and glowing blurbs.

The less time I spent actually writing, the more importance its accessories assumed. I developed a fetish for pens, examined different grotesquely expensive models in stores in the east 40s, bought aged red leather-bound notebooks. I sought salvation in the pressure sensitivity of a gliding ball-point, the burgundy glow of a grip. My masterpiece just needed the right pen – then it would write itself.

I remembered what I’d read about Joyce’s ability to write in crowded, noisy rooms and cafes. I told myself that I was just more refined than Joyce, more at the mercy of sensory circumstance. I stared furiously at the sources of stray coughs, firmly closed books and whispers. But during the rare intervals when all of my superstitions were met, when perfect silence reigned and attractive girls were positioned outside of my sight-lines, when I sat gripping a beautiful leather pen held just above an elegantly lined white page, I felt an odd bashful guilt, like a teenage boy who finds himself alone in an empty house with a willing girl whose parents are away and suddenly panics, longing again for all of the obstacles and prohibitions he was so anxious to remove.

I thought of a Henry James quote on the unimportance of experience: to write a novel about the army, a true writer needs only to glance in the window of a barracks while walking past. I disagreed with Mr. James. In fact, I was convinced that if one wanted to write a novel about women, it was the writer's sworn duty to sleep with at least 10 of them.

But this duty was surprisingly hard to fulfill. I’d seen gorgeous girls all over the city, among the Etruscan sculptures at the Met, perched with the other graduate students on the steps of Columbia’s library, on the subway and the street. But the girls, like almost everyone in New York, seemed oblivious of my presence.

After two full days and nothing written, I started to think that my time would be best used in the
accumulation of experience, particularly of the sexual variety. Sex was an end in itself, but also a means of stockpiling experiences that would one day flow forth in a Kundera-esque novel that found deep resonances between Nietzsche, having sex with people and the late Beethoven string quartets.

I was horny, but I felt my lust was ennobled by literature. A few seduced and abandoned girls were a small price to pay for the eternal beauty I would fashion from the raw material of fucking. My friends were equally driven in their courting and callous in its aftermath; we all felt a sort of artistic exemption from morality. I quoted Thomas Mann's remark about the artist's willingness to cause suffering for the sake of aesthetic pleasure. My friends invoked the amorous habits of Pablo Picasso. We all figured we had an artistic duty to behave as badly as possible.

The night before my interview at the hedge fund my parents called. They thought there was no hope for me in New York. They wanted me to come home while I could still afford the flight (they didn’t know I’d already spent my savings down far below the price of the plane ticket). They felt a degree in the humanities was a kind of massive ankle weight that would slow me down in the race of life. There was a dim hope for my survival if I applied myself with superhuman diligence, but otherwise I would soon perish.

I was guarded about my finances. I denied them information, they denied me funds. We both controlled access to a commodity the other craved. In the absence of concrete details, my mother’s concerns blossomed into dark nightmares - she thought I was sleeping on park benches, pecked by vultures, battling with pigeons for stray hunks of bread. I spent most of our brief conversations telling her what I was not - dead, starving, homeless - and very little time telling her what I was. Thus she continued not to hear the concrete details that could have checked her catastrophic visions and the cycle repeated itself. In her mind the city was tainted with a pervasive evil, suffused with a biblical sinfulness that could only be cleansed through some massive strickening, a plague or flood to wash away the lepers and unchaste. My father took a somewhat less imaginative view of the situation, though he did allow himself a metaphor: I was a child who stubbornly insisted on venturing into a snowstorm without a coat. Soon enough I would learn the folly of my ways, my frozen hand would come knocking at the front door, I would slip into a warm fur-lined parka and realize the eternal verity of parental wisdom. I pointed out that there was also a small but distinct chance that my young frozen corpse would be found in a deep snow-drift the morning after the blizzard.

I didn’t mention the interview. I wanted to tell them once I had the job.
CHAPTER 6

By Friday morning I was marginally prepared. I was wearing one of my father's suits, which looked less like a product of the 1980s than it might have, and I'd heeded my mother's advice that a good breakfast is essential for a good day by taking enough quarters from the communal laundry change cup to buy a ham-and-cheese omelet at the diner on 148th. I was due downtown in the financial district at 10 a.m.

After my initial phone interview, I'd done a bit of research on Hamilton and Co. Their website supplied the comforting statistic that approximately one out of every thousand applicants was hired. The prose on the site burst with words like brilliant, elite and extraordinary. The site reminded me a bit of a college recruiting brochure. There were pictures of attractive people laughing in bright sunlight, perhaps taking a break between bouts of exercising their extraordinary brilliance. There were also more serious photos, ones meant to inspire confidence in investors: a woman with dark hair pulled into a frighteningly tight ponytail staring at a computer monitor and frowning intently, as if staring down an opponent before a boxing match. A muscular man in a pressed polo shirt gesturing at a set of equations scrawled on a white board, his mouth caught partly open as he made what was surely some subtly brilliant point about higher mathematics.

I asked around in our extended set of friends to see if anyone knew anyone who knew something about the fund. A friend of the painter's was dating a girl who used to work there. She said the pay was fantastic, the work was strange and the people were "a bit intense." I wanted to find out just what “fantastic” meant.

I took the subway downtown, got off at the Wall Street station and surged with the flowing mass of commuters up a set of stairs into the street and sunlight. The buildings were immense, totemic. The charming brownstones of the upper west side seemed like the city’s architectural consolation for massive anonymous towers. The brownstones and the brick buildings in Harlem were imaginable on a human scale, there were bodies framed in lighted windows at night, newspapers or toddlers on the front steps in the mornings. But these buildings were austere to the point that any human occupancy seemed improbable. All I could imagine when I looked at the exteriors were hundreds of quietly whirring computers monitoring transfers of vast sums of foreign currencies.

I found the Hamilton and Co. tower a few blocks from the train station. Any ambiguity about its identity was removed by the helpfully massive gold lettering spelling its name above the twin revolving glass doors. Dark glass and steel rose above the entrance as far as I could see. I thought of the 1 in a 1,000 statistic and felt my usual cockiness weaken slightly. It seemed like at any moment someone would realize my presence was the result of a misunderstanding and I'd be whisked back to the cockroaches and noise of my natural Harlem habitat.
I pushed through the revolving doors into the lobby and the feeling instantly deepened. The floor was green marble with white veins, the ceilings were easily 40-feet high and a dazzling fountain sent water cascading down a series of terraced levels to a clear pool in the center of the lobby. Beyond the fountain was a set of turnstiles and three parallel metal detectors. Two guards sat behind a station next to the turnstiles. They gave me faintly incredulous looks as I approached.

"Floor?" one asked as I walked over.

"47th floor, um, Hamilton and Co."

It came out more as a question than an answer.

"You askin' me or tellin' me?"

The other guard sniggered. Apparently they'd realized I wasn't a potential investor who had to be treated with deference. I'd have to cultivate my imperious gaze.

"Against the wall for a picture, please."

The first guard pressed a button on a console and a hidden camera snapped my photo. The guard asked my name and a few seconds later handed me a sticker with a photo of my face looking bewildered above my name in bold letters.

"Through the gate, elevator on the left, someone will meet you upstairs."

I went toward the metal detectors and noticed the man standing ahead of me was grinning. When his turn came to pass through the detector he winked at the guard and said,

"I just stepped out to grab this samurai sword."

He gestured inside his jacket as if to reveal the sword. A few people within earshot looked vaguely horrified, but the guard just laughed, then ducked and weaved and struck the air with his fists like a boxer.

"I take out you and your sword with my bare fists, man. I'm like fuckin' Rocky."

They gave each other a high five. I followed the man into a lobby and got on the same ascending elevator. He pushed the button for the 47th floor, then looked over and raised his hands innocently.

"Don't worry, I'm not really a samurai."

"I thought humor was prohibited in corporate settings."

"I'm only barely tolerated. They need me like the king needs a fool. What floor?"

"Same as you."

"Hamilton and Co.?"

I nodded.

"Are you an investor?"

Maybe I didn't look too shabby after all.

"No, I'm actually taking an interview."

He shook his head.

"Oh man, oh man."

I chuckled, nervously. We passed the 28th floor.

"My only advice - just don't be intimidated by any bullshit. But you didn't hear me say that."

He put on a mock spokesman face and voice.

"Of course there's no bullshit at Hamilton and Co."

We passed the 42nd floor. He looked maybe thirty. He was pale and his shoulders were stooped, as if frozen in the posture of someone lighting a cigarette. The doors chimed and opened onto the 47th floor and we walked into a lobby painted a pristine white. He stuck out his hand.

"I've got a game of hangman to finish. Just check in at reception."
In one fluid motion the receptionist rose, greeted me with my full name, shook my hand and asked if I would please follow her right this way. I cast a backward glance at the waiting area - high ceilings, two strangely shaped modern sofas, copies of The Economist and The New York Times on a glass coffee table - and then followed her into the office suite. We walked down a short hallway, past a kitchen where a few people in jeans were sipping Cokes and into a large open area with maybe fifty people seated at desks arranged in small clusters with lanes and gaps between the desks. We threaded our way through the clumps of workers and as we passed I noticed people's eyes flicking from computer screens to me with an idle curiosity, the way a crowd watches a prisoner being led to the scaffold.

I held the gazes that rose to watch me as I passed. I even smiled at the girls. I was getting ready to try a few winks when we turned a right angle and went down a hallway to a perfectly white room empty except for a table, two chairs and a small trashcan in the corner. The receptionist gestured to a chair and asked if she could bring me something to drink. I asked for a Coke and she closed the door behind her.

I was left in the perfect silence and whiteness of the room. It was like some kind of interrogation chamber from a 1960s soviet spy movie. The lighting wasn't quite harsh enough, but the bare bleakness seemed designed to cause psychological breakdowns that would reveal valuable state secrets. I was musing in this vein when the door opened and the receptionist entered with a glass full of ice and a Coke.

"In case you like it on the rocks," she smiled at the glass and set both items on the table.

"You'll be talking with Suzy first today. She'll be right in."

I was sure I'd be asked questions about finance. The little Proust game on the phone was fun, but now they'd get down to business: derivatives and portfolios, analysis of emerging vs. mature markets, that kind of thing. Maybe if I just used the relevant terms in random sentences I'd make an impression. 'Well I'm quite interested in analyzing derivative portfolios in emerging markets.' This was how I'd watched many people get through college, they learned the right terms and strung them together into meaningless yet impressive sentences.

The longer I waited the more nervous I became. The room was totally silent. Blood was pounding in my temples, the sound of fizzing thunderous when I opened the coke. It was the kind of deep silence that has an almost tangible quality, something that cloaks and constricts. I looked at the clock on my cellphone: 10:01 AM. I recited as many Shakespeare sonnets as I could remember. I tapped paradiddles on the table. I stretched, paced, yawned. By 10:30 no one had come.

After a few more minutes I noticed something strange. At first it was hardly perceptible, just this faint acrid smell. Somewhat sulfurous, almost like smoke. I wondered if I had developed some kind of satanic body odor. The smell sharpened and intensified and I stood and paced the room, sniffing. Then I noticed a hissing sound coming from the corner of the room.

The trashcan was on fire.
A wisp of smoke curled from the top of the trashcan. Inside a few white papers and cardboard cups were burning in an odd way, with very vertical, flickering flames. I looked around the room, as if the walls might have some explanatory power. The trashcan was plastic and would probably melt soon if I didn’t do something. I walked back to the table, picked up the glass of Coke with melting ice cubes and dumped it over the flames in the can. They hissed and sizzled and died. I stood there a moment, just staring at the smoldering ashes, wondering if I were insane.

I went back to my chair and stared suspiciously at the trashcan, half-expecting it to burst into flames. A moment later the door of the room opened and a 30ish woman in a blue business skirt and white blouse strode into the room and smiled at me.
"Hi, I'm Suzy! We spoke on the phone."
I was expecting her to be as sleekly and imperiously attractive as the women on the H&Co website. Instead she was short and frumpy, wearing jeans and an old Princeton t-shirt.
"Right, nice to meet you."
She took the seat opposite mine across the table and began arranging some papers.
"So how are you?"
How to mention that the trashcan was just on fire?
"I'm, I'm good..."
She looked at me expectantly, lips slightly parted, eyebrows politely raised. There wasn't going to be a graceful way to do this.
"So, before you came in, the trashcan there sort of just caught on fire."
She instantly beamed.
"Congratulations! You passed the trashcan test."
"Excuse me?"
She kept laughing but raised her hands to show an explanation was coming.
"It's a new evaluation tool we've been using recently. The purpose is to figure out whether people solve problems even when they haven't created them, and if so, how they solve them. Some people leave the room and go looking for someone to help them, which shows initiative but risks burning the room down. It also lacks independence. Some people flip the can over to cut off the oxygen, other people stomp on it, and others pour their drink on it, like you. Flipping and stomping risk damaging the rug and the person, respectively, so pouring the drink is actually the best option."

I stared at her.

“But let me back up a moment. Only about 50% of people try to extinguish the fire. The other 50% just sit there, hoping it will go out. We even had one candidate who fled the building. Never heard from her again. Of the people who do take action, most seek to enlist outside help. So the first thing we look for is independent problem-solvers. The second thing we look for is honesty - some people who put out the fire simply act like nothing happened. We have a full interview and
they never mention that before I walked in the room they were stomping around with their foot in the trashcan. Maybe they say nothing because they actually think they caused the fire, or at the least they fear they would be penalized regardless of their involvement. We'll never know, really, because unlike a psychology study there's no debriefing afterward unless you pass the test."
She paused and I nodded, taking this in.
"In case you're curious, it's not actual fire so there's no possibility of injury or danger. It's an artificial remote-controlled flame and the smell and sound effects come from the walls. Now, you've signed the non-disclosure agreement?"
I shook my head.
They must have somehow been able to monitor the room and known to turn off the flames when I poured the Coke over them.
"Oh? Our mistake, let me get you to sign this form, and if you don't think this is all just too bizarre, we can start the interview."
I smiled and maintained what I hoped was a tactful silence.
"I should probably just reiterate that even if you have no background knowledge of finance or investing, it's not a problem. Our recruiting efforts are unique in that we'll actively create a position for someone we want to hire - we match the job to the person as much as vice versa, and strong communication skills are always an asset. Like I mentioned on the phone my doctorate is in French literature, I hadn't done math in ten years, but here I am."
She smiled. She spoke in a clipped, fast breathless voice and reminded me of an articulate child constantly pestering its mother with precocious observations. She surveyed some typed text on a sheet of paper.
"Now you studied English literature and philosophy. What specific themes or authors interested you, why did you study those subjects?"
Was she seriously asking what interested me? The question seemed like something you would ask over a cup of tea, not in a corporate tower in the financial district.
"Oh, this and that," I stalled.
She just kept staring at me, so after a moment I launched into whatever came to mind.
"Well one of the oldest reasons to study philosophy is well-expressed by Cicero's remark: to philosophize is to learn how to die."
I wasn't quite sure what this meant, but I remembered reading it in a class once and I liked the sound of it. She nodded, waiting for more. I started improvising.
"And Montaigne has an essay with that quote as its title in which he argues that the contemplation of philosophy draws our souls away from ourselves and our bodies, which is a kind of preview of the state of death, a preparation for the ultimate split of soul from body. In the Montaigne essay you see what one of my professors called philosophy's power-of-mind tradition, which starts probably with Plato and, put simplistically, holds that a properly cultivated mind has the power to nullify the power of our bodily appetites, the power of the state, even of death. That interests me, as does a loosely corresponding theme in philosophy and literature that you might call frailty-of-mind, which involves the limits of the intellect and the limits of language's expressive power. You see this in Wittgenstein's fascination with silence, in the Greek concept of Aporia - the inexpressible - and in all sorts of writers from Kafka's novels to the line from T.S. Eliot: "It's impossible to say just what I mean!"
I paused. This sort of thing came easily to me. All those conversations with my philosophy professor in college went like this, though he did most of the talking.
Was this what she wanted? I thought this kind of cultural riffing would perplex corporate
employers, but she seemed enthralled. She was busily jotting down notes, nodding as she wrote. She looked up.

"How would you place Descartes in the context of those traditions?"
"Well he has the rationalist belief in innate ideas that precede the development of the senses, so that implies a limit on the power of mind, at least as long as mind is conceived of as an empirical, data-collecting entity, like in Locke."

"I had a wonderful seminar on Descartes at Princeton. My professor could actually recite the complete text of the Meditations from memory. What you just said about a priori reasoning reminded me of his proofs of the existence of God."

I hadn't read Descartes in ages, but I remembered that there were two proofs. I could only recall the second.

"The first or the second?"
"The second."

I was in luck.

"A classic of circular reasoning: Existence is more perfect than nonexistence. God is perfect. Therefore God exists."

She laughed loudly. The setting and our respective roles were just strong enough to drain the room of any sexual potential, but these types of conversations had loosely flirtatious connotations for me ever since I discovered in college that certain girls became greatly interested in making out after hearing me talk philosophy or quote a few stanzas of poetry. Then again I went to a college where talking about Proust or Aristotle actually constituted flirting. Everyone was into the profundity game, spinning out a version of the meaning of it all. We were drunk on the power of great books and writers, or at least on the power of their names. We were also frequently drunk on the power of vodka, which had a way of revealing who had actually read the books in question. My flirtatious book riffs were modifications of the comments I made in classes and papers; they happened on couches rather than chairs, in bedrooms instead of classrooms, and they were lazier, more impassioned declarations that tended to involve inching progressively closer to a tipsy girl.

The purpose of the remarks was not to make some interesting statement about books, but to identify myself as the type of person who makes interesting statements about books. Saying anything genuinely interesting was incidental, a means to an end, which always gave me a slight sensation of fraudulence. At parties we riffed and mused to get laid, in classes we riffed and mused to get A's.

But I never thought I'd be in a Wall Street skyscraper talking about my readings. I still had a very partial understanding of what a hedge fund was or what I could possibly do at one. After Descartes we talked about Aristotle and the Nicomachean Ethics. She told me about a year she'd spent in Athens on a fellowship and soon I was asking her as many questions as she was asking me. If we were on a date, I would have gone to the restaurant bathroom, grinned at myself in the mirror and taken a breath mint, confident of at least a kiss in a few hours. Sometimes she would recall her role as interrogator and ask a series of questions but soon we drifted back into a spontaneous exchange of anecdotes about writers, our tastes and impressions, our experiences in New York. After her doctorate at Princeton, she had declined an assistant professorship at an obscure southwestern school and taken a job in recruiting at Hamilton and Co. because of the "great money" and a growing disenchantment with the politics of academe. We darted from
Chaucer to Homer to the essays of Virginia Woolf.

Some topics I knew more about than others, but I was skillful at guiding the conversation in certain directions and lingering on the subjects I felt most comfortable with. When I hadn't read something I admitted it, having witnessed too many disastrous attempts to feign expertise in college, and she seemed relieved and almost excited by the gaps in my reading, as if they affirmed something as important as whatever I did know. She was harder to dazzle than most girls I'd talked to, or at least she was better at concealing any surprise she felt, but after I reeled off a few sentences from the second volume of Proust, an extended metaphor comparing a seaside restaurant at Balbec to an aquarium, she just raised her eyebrows appreciatively and smiled.

I still wasn't sure what the salary was and I wanted to get a specific figure without seeming tactless. At the end of our interview she handed me a sheet of paper.

"Now, let me give you a tentative schedule for today and then I'll go over some basic information about Hamilton and Co. You'll notice we booked you with quite a few recruiters today. You were going to meet with Tom at 11:30, but you and I ran late, which is fine, so if it's alright with you, I was thinking you could break for lunch now and then pick up with Nathan at 1:30. Lunch is on us, I'll give you a credit card before you go. And please go anywhere you like. Absolutely anywhere is fine, price is not a problem."

I was about to ask about the salary when she began talking again.

"Before you go, let me just go over some basic information. Usually someone with your background would be a good fit for one of our personal assistant positions. Though as I said we do sometimes create new positions or hybrid positions or retrain people for positions like an analyst or "quant." We also seek your input, to make sure you're happy with whatever role you'll have. All of our positions include full benefits - dental, medical, optical - and four weeks of paid vacations. Starting salaries for the positions you'd be considered for range from $110,000 to $145,000. There are lots of other perks we can go into later, but that's an overview. Enjoy lunch!"

Most of my friends made $12/hour.

I was interviewing for a job with a starting salary of $145,000.
CHAPTER 8

I went to lunch in a dark bar and devoured a bowl of French onion soup and a bacon and guacamole cheeseburger. For dessert I had a slice of apple pie with vanilla ice cream. It was the first substantial meal I’d eaten in days. The morning had left me thoroughly confused. I'd pictured people in crisp suits doing complex math, instead I got a woman in jeans who wanted to talk philosophy. I felt absurdly overdressed. Could I really get a job that made over six figures by talking about books? It seemed too good to be true. But that didn't stop me from spending most of lunch imagining hazy visions of myself making vast sums of money and commanding fleets of MBAs. Maybe all the jokes about English majors and poverty were wrong, and this fund had realized that just having read Flaubert made one capable of raking in enormous quarterly profits.

As I walked back to the building I saw the samurai man standing outside the main entrance smoking a cigarette. His body seemed to be in its natural state, hunched and furtive. He raised his head and exhaled smoke as I walked up.
"So, any second-degree burns?"
It took me a minute to understand.
"You know about the trashcan thing?"
He giggled, hacked out some smoke and phlegm.
"I like to watch. It's like theater of the absurd mixed with an undergrad psychology experiment, which sort of describes this place as a whole. Anyhow, some of the more relaxed recruiters let us watch the room cam. People's faces when they first notice the fire are priceless."
"So how many people were watching me?"
"Not that many - Suzy's cool about it, so she let me watch. Nice sonnets, by the way."
"That was audible?"
He nodded.
"Don't worry- they love that sort of thing. Most people don't get past the first interview. Just stay calm, you'll be fine. I thought I was screwed after my first interview because I solved the trashcan test by noticing the fire was fake. They don't like to be caught looking dumb, so this pissed them off. Apparently they hadn't refined the fire to its current degree of plausibility. So I just told them there was some kind of fake flame in the trashcan and they got embarrassed."
"Huh."
"I toyed with the idea of warning you in the elevator. Using some kind of Delphic code that you'd decipher just as the fire started. But they would rape and flog me if they knew I'd tipped you off. Plus I didn't want to spoil my own viewing pleasure."
He finished the cigarette and stubbed it into the sidewalk with the toe of his black leather shoe.
"If you haven't noticed already, you'll find that they're obsessed with intelligence. Most recruiters here take the position that the name of your school and your test scores directly predict your braininess. Now and then they do something risky and hire someone who went to Wesleyan and congratulate themselves on their broad-mindedness."
"I've heard good things about Wesleyan."
"I enjoyed it. But for all the supposed width of the net they cast here, it's quite a narrow haul -
they hire the Ivies and a handful of others that are basically the same thing."
Whatever the wisdom of their hiring prejudices, I was pleased to hear that I stood to benefit from them.
"So it's a pretty homogeneous group?"
"You see a lot of Harvard math guys, mostly they come fresh from undergrad, though the
doctorates are intensely recruited. Not that any of the additional math the PhDs know has a
practical benefit, but we pay for the prestige. For some reason the former president of Dartmouth
works here too. Comes in two days a week and makes a cool $500K a year. No one quite knows
what he does. Some former senators are on staff for prestige, though they usually work the old
connections enough to make back their salaries by getting us tax breaks or discouraging certain
regulations."
"So what's your position here?"
"I work closely with Mr. Hamilton's private staff and personal affairs. I make sure his apples have
an appropriately luscious sheen. I make sure the kitchen cleaning products won't give the children
brain damage. That sort of thing."
We stepped out into the lobby and paused before the frosted glass doors of the Hamilton & Co
suite. He handed me a business card.
"David Patrick."
I introduced myself. He wished me luck for the second time that day and vanished into the suite's
interior.
That afternoon I took six interviews in four hours. Three of my interviewers were only slightly
older than me, three were middle-aged. One was British, one was Iranian, one was Texan.
Everything was going well until a woman asked me a hypothetical question about puppies.
"Now, as you may have gathered, we value intelligence very highly, and we expect even
seemingly simple things to be analyzed and considered very closely. Suppose you were tasked
with researching the question of puppies? How would you proceed?"
I wasn't aware that puppies were a question. I heard myself asking,
"Any particular aspect of the puppy question?"
"Imagine we've hired you, and one of Mr. Hamilton's children wants a puppy. You're tasked with
doing the relevant research. How would you proceed?"
"Well, I guess you'd want a puppy that's cute, good around kids, maybe house-broken?"
She waited for me to say more, but I wasn't sure what to say. Finally she spoke.
"First you'd need to consider the breed's general qualities along such indices as health,
susceptibility to training, aggressiveness, typical life-span, etc. You'd consult books, call
breeders, and create a short list of breeds that met general search criteria. At this point you might
begin contacting specific breeders, perhaps people who have worked in dog shows and have
extensive experience. You'd elicit input from the Hamiltons on a number of points - desired
softness of fur, size, color, gender - though ideally you'd be prepared to make justifiable
recommendations on all of these points. You'd compile photos, sources, quotes, and statistics and
make a presentation to the Hamiltons. With their input, you'd be able to begin assessing the
reliability and quality of various New York breeders. You'd find customer lists, gauge their
satisfaction and figure out which breeders do the best job of pleasing similarly high-end clients."

For $145,000 I'd dissect dead puppies to determine the state of their internal organs. I nodded and
made an expression meant to convey the reasonableness of her words and my foolishness for not
having anticipated them.

The puppy question was my largest mistake of the afternoon. It was also the moment I would recall later, the first of many signs that there was something strange about this hedge fund. But at the time I disregarded these signs, the way someone horny enough ignores blatant hints that a possible lover is actually psychotic.

The other interviews were a kind of intellectual fencing - I would state an interest or topic and be asked to give a detailed account of some intricate aspect of the subject. I recalled a few dusty formulas from an introductory economics course my freshman year of college, but for the most part I talked humanities: the role of the Romantic poets in the creation of Shakespeare's reputation, John Dewey's ideas on the mundane origins of the aesthetic, Suetonius' account of the last days of Julius Caesar. The interviewers nodded, took notes, asked me to clarify or elaborate on certain points. By the end of the day I was exhausted and still basically clueless as to what I could possibly do at a hedge fund. I spent the train ride home imagining my life as a wealthy hedge fund consultant. The silk of my boxers, the casualness of my flings, the importance and difficulty of the work I would do. Life would be great.
CHAPTER 9

Suzy called me a week later. Someone who worked closely with Mr. Hamilton had left the firm the week I interviewed. The vacancy had to be filled immediately and they thought I would be a good fit. When she mentioned that the starting salary was 140,000 dollars I promptly choked on a piece of bread with peanut butter.
"I see," I finally stammered.
I was trying not to sound the way people look as they open the door to find the sweepstakes spokesman holding a large check, the camera crew peeping from behind the front bushes, broadcasting their baffled delight to a live television audience. Suzy began enumerating the other incentives they had to offer: 4 weeks of paid vacation each year, full medical and dental benefits, free access to the city's museums with my company ID, yoga classes at the downtown building, and ample opportunities for performance bonuses and annual raises.

I'd been subsisting for the last week on a diet of viscous, stale peanut butter and whole wheat bread. I didn't need to hear descriptions of a corporate utopia, but I let her keep talking until she'd exhausted her list of enticements. I was already convinced. Even if the job was terrible, the money was too good to refuse. I could travel the world, seduce beautiful women, dash off a book or two...first I just needed to make some money. I promised myself I'd save every penny I could.
"Wow, well."
"If you are interested, we'd like you to start right away."
"Would you like to get back to me after you've thought it over?"
"I'd like to accept the job."
"Great, you can come to the downtown office tomorrow and we'll get some paperwork out of the way before you head over to the residence."
"The residence?"
"Yes, Mr. Hamilton's residence."
"Ah, right."

She said something cheerful and hung up. I was sitting on a bench in Central Park. Orange and red leaves were falling like leisurely deserters of a vast, aerial army. I expected some kind of acknowledgment from my surroundings, a new deference in people walking past, maybe a sudden mass genuflection. But nobody even looked at me; I'd have to make the world realize my importance.

First I told my parents. I'd fantasized about this moment, imagined their initial disbelief, how their assumption that I was joking would slowly crack under the force of my calm insistence that I was employed by one of the world's largest hedge funds. Naturally I'd exaggerated the fantasy to perverse proportions - I saw myself flying home at a moment's notice and dazzling them with my urbanity and wealth, I pictured my casual grace as I flicked a credit card on the restaurant table after dinner. The actual call was mildly disappointing. They responded to my news with the appropriate incredulity, but rather than morphing into an apologetic admission that they should
have trusted me all along, they asked how exactly I'd gotten this job.
"I talked about my interests and they hired me."
"So you talked about reading?"
"Yes, dad, I talked about Proust and Descartes."
"Well I have interests. I watch PBS. Would they hire me?"
"They want smart people from whatever background."
"And what are you gonna do there to earn the big bucks? You gonna make them money by reading?"
I still didn't really know what I'd do.
"They'll re-train me as an analyst of some sort. You know, derivatives and market fluctuation parameters, stuff like that."
I had no idea what this meant, but it sounded impressive.
By the end of the conversation I'd beaten them into a tentative acceptance of my employment.
Later they googled Hamilton & Co and read the recruiting section and saw a company that hired English majors really did exist. But this only convinced them that the company was bizarre and that there had to be a catch. For this kind of money, I told them, I could deal with a catch.
With friends I played it cool. My conversations were variations on a theme:
"So I got a job today."
"Oh, what?"
"Just something in finance."
"Like secretarial?"
"No. I'm kind of an analyst."
"Oh wow. An analyst of what?"
"Systems, markets. you know."
"Jesus, get away from me. Do I know you?"
"Yeah it's weird, right?"
"So how's the money?"
"Not bad, not bad."
"Come on you bastard, a figure."
"Let's just say it's good money."
"Now it's good - before it was just not bad."
"It's good."
"How good?"
"I start at 140,000."
"That's very funny."
"I know, I was surprised too."
"You're asking me to believe that you're not joking? You're telling me you're not joking. Is that part of the joke?"
"I'm not joking."
"Holy fucking Christ you lucky bastard fuck."
"Luck is what the weak call skill."
"Oh fuck yourself, you sound like Ayn Rand."

That afternoon I went to a bank and applied for a credit card. No need to eat peanut butter anymore. The painter met me at a gourmet food shop in the west 90s and any lingering doubts he
may have had vanished as I grabbed imported Camembert, brie and goat cheese, smoked sausage and french baguettes and made for the cash register. We got a 40 dollar bottle of Portuguese wine and caught the train uptown. We met the photographer at our apartment, disabled the alarm on the roof access door and sat on the warm black tar with our backs against a brick chimney. We had a clear view of the sun setting over the Hudson, the first lights flicking on in New Jersey apartments across the river. We ate like peasants crashing a royal feast and drank the bottle of wine more quickly than it deserved, finishing just as the last light vanished. I wanted to prolong the night indefinitely, to savor the knowledge that I was employed without having to experience the reality of work. My friends, like my parents, raised the possibility that there might be a catch: to get so much money I'd have to do something deeply degrading. "Like serve hipsters espresso in the east village?" I said.
I spent the next morning installing myself in a cubicle on the 47th floor of the Hamilton & Co building. Suzy was my supervisor for the day. My actual boss, Kate, was on an important errand. One of the first things I learned was that Suzy and I were PCs, personal consultants. We shared office space with QAs - quantitative analysts. PCs got access to Robert Hamilton's office on the 50th floor, QAs did not. PCs were vastly outnumbered, but our ranks were growing. In the 1990s there were 12-15 PCs, now there were closer to 40. There were hundreds of QAs in this building and Hamilton had offices around the world. Most PCs and QAs had degrees from the same handful of schools, but they'd studied different things. QAs were math and physics majors, with the occasional retrained history major. PCs were philosophy, english and comp. lit majors. QAs made the money, PCs spent it.

"Some days, you're a PC, others a PS - personal slave, piece of shit. Consultant is a necessary euphemism, but it's all in your power, how you perceive the work you do here. I've embraced my status as slave."

David Patrick had wandered over to my cubicle and begun a monologue.

"What do PCs do exactly?"

"You'll learn soon enough. Basically the answer is everything, anything. We try to make Robert Hamilton's life easier, better, more seamless. You got the puppy question? That's not too far-fetched. If Joseph or Leah wanted a puppy, god forbid, you'd do a basically global search for the world's best puppy. You'd find Super Puppy."

"Joseph and Leah are?"

"Hamilton's kids, Leah is 14, Joseph is four. He's terrifying - he once stabbed my legs with a toy sword for an entire meeting at the residence. I don't think Robert noticed."

Suzy walked over and gestured to me.

"Come with me."

David stepped aside and I followed her along a row of desks. We turned into an office and she closed the door. Light was shining in from a floor-to-ceiling window behind the desk. She wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to me.

"Memorize that and tear up the paper. That's the code for the 50th floor, the address of the Hamilton residence, and the elevator code to access the residence. None of this information should be revealed."

I stared at the paper, committed the numbers and addresses to memory and tore it up. She took the scraps of paper and put them through a shredder beside her desk.

"Your first few months here will be a probationary period. This is standard, nothing personal, everyone goes through it. What it means practically is you won't ever be alone in the office suite or residence. Kate wanted to tell you this, but she was called away on urgent business - Robert forgot his carrots and he has a meeting downtown. So she has to go to the residence, get the carrots, then get to his meeting, all in under an hour. Now you might be wondering, couldn't he just skip the carrots? That's a perfectly normal question that in a few weeks you wouldn't dream of asking."

She paused and breathed, something she did rarely and rapidly.
"Robert needs extreme order and regularity. Not having his carrots would quite literally be a catastrophe. He's willing to pay a lot of smart people a lot of money to make sure he gets his carrots."

I nodded. When I heard Kate was away on urgent business I’d pictured some crucial negotiation, maybe a meeting with the board of the NY Stock Exchange. Not a frantic cab ride uptown to retrieve carrots.

"We'll take advantage of Robert being away from the office to slip upstairs and deliver a few things. Come back here so you can see what I do."

I walked around the desk and crouched beside her to see the computer screen. She scrolled through a series of documents, each with a picture of a face and several paragraphs of text. "These are briefings for Robert, highly confidential. You print these, arrange them alphabetically in a manila folder, write the name of the meeting in clear, block letters in red ink on the upper right corner of the folder. The folder should be delivered no later than 10 minutes before the meeting it pertains to, and in some cases he'll need it much sooner. Today he has a 2 PM so we're fine on time."

The documents were landing in the printer tray when the phone rang. Suzy picked it up, cradling it between her neck and shoulder. "Hey Kate."

Through static I dimly heard what sounded like "I need a position." The voice sounded like the scrambled voice of an informant in a documentary about the mob. "Sure, give me one second."

The way Suzy typed was amazing. There were no discrete key strokes, just a sustained collision between her hands and the keyboard that resulted in a strangely colored grid appearing on the screen. Some sort of diagram or architectural plan. She was zooming in and out, adjusting depth of detail and location. "Just one second," she said into the phone.

It was a building plan, a schematic of a skyscraper. She flipped the orientation 90 degrees and zoomed in on a small grid with a red dot pulsing in its center. "He's still at the first site, looks like the 38th floor, stationary."

She hung up. "Kate needs an intercept point."

I nodded, no clue what she was talking about. "So initially the GPS on Robert's phone was just a precaution, so that we could locate it if he lost it. But we soon realized it was useful in other contexts. Now if we need to know where he is at any time, we can pinpoint a position."

The phone rang again. "Hi Kate."

"Right, will do."

She hung up. "So, looks like I'll be stuck here for a bit. Kate needs me to monitor his position so she can establish an intercept point to deliver the carrots. I still want you to deliver this folder to his office, so let's have David take you upstairs."

She called him and a minute later he opened the door to the office. "Would you be so kind as to guide him through the placement of a folder?"

He gave a theatrical, ceremonious bow, twirling one hand in airy arabesques as he bent forward.
"Yes, Madame," he said in a British accent, flipping his curly brown hair back as he snapped to attention and saluted her.
We walked out past rows of desks and computers, a QA at each.
"I like to salute Suzy, let her know she's in charge. Kate would freak out if I did that to her because she actually cares about being in charge. Any sign of mockery and she flips, she wants genuine displays of submission. You know about dominance hierarchies in wolf packs?"
He paused as we walked through the reception area into the elevator lobby.
"We don't get along too well, Kate and I."
I was going to ask about wolf packs when he dropped his voice to a whisper.
"I always read these." He smirked and chuckled. It took me a minute to realize what he was talking about: the information in the folder we were delivering.
"A lot of it is boring, so-and-so worked as junior v.p. at Goldman Sachs for seven years before accepting a position with the Renaissance Fund and so on. But some of this stuff is FANTASTIC, it's basically dirt on some of the richest people and companies in the city. There's a reason so many files here are encrypted and so many offices have paper shredders. We get a corporate detective service to do due diligence on potential clients, partners, funders, employees."
The elevator arrived but David just shook his head as the doors opened. Two women inside stared at us and watched the doors close.
"Whenever other people are on the elevator, you wait for the next one. Security precaution."
"So Hamilton uses corporate detectives?"
This was great - I seemed to be learning all sorts of things I probably wasn't supposed to know. I wanted to keep David talking, which didn't seem too hard to do.
"Yeah, we've used a few different companies - K3, Kroll - and sometimes things are even done in-house. Some stuff gets crazy. Like last year there was this rumor that a certain bank had been using paper shredders that could somehow reconstitute images of the documents shredded. So after that we tore apart shredders to see if someone was stealing sensitive information. We didn't find anything, but there's still a weekly sweep to check all shredders."
Another elevator arrived, this one empty, and we got on. David punched in the seven digit code in short, quick thumb-jabs, and a green light illuminated behind the 50th floor button. He leafed through the pages in the folder.
"Nothing new," he muttered.
The elevator doors opened to reveal a huge painting hung on a white wall. Masses of blue and green on a white canvas. It looked iconic, like something at MOMA. Jasper Johns, maybe Kandinski? The floor of the lobby was tiled in a white-veined green marble. Two doors flanked the painting. He saw me staring.
"It's Jackson Pollock, 17 million dollars. One of the PCs is a PhD in art history from Stanford, so she consults on acquisitions," he said. I couldn't tell if his nonchalance was genuine or calculated to impress me.

We opened the door on the left of the painting. A receptionist smiled at us. David nodded to her and we crossed a second lobby to a white door. He unlocked it and I followed him inside.

The office was immense, larger than my entire apartment. Three sides had floor-to-ceiling windows instead of walls. The fourth wall had bookshelves filled with tomes on math, number theory, ergodic theory. The entire space was flooded with bright natural light. The desk was an
an elongated glass oval that could fit maybe 20 people if it were a dinner table.  
"Take a minute, by all means: it demands gaping."
"I'm gaping?"
"Gape away, that's what people do. What tourists fly from Japan to see, he ignores every day."
"The skyline is just, wow."
"My first few weeks, I was always lingering by the windows trying to make out fire escapes, looking down at cabs, school kids. Suzy was my "officer" during probation and she let me stare out the windows a fair bit."
The aerial view seemed to make the city intelligible: what was chaos from below resolved into patterns and structure from above: grids, lines, angles.
"Here, try these."
David was standing by a pair of massive binoculars mounted on a tripod.
"We're not supposed to do this, but just have a quick look. He got these for the kids, who are never really here, and he doesn't use them."
I pressed my face into the lenses and saw in fantastic detail the glass facade of a neighboring tower. I angled them downward and the details of the street emerged: colors of clothing, types of cars, the names of deli's and stores.
"These are astral binoculars, meant for looking at the stars. A PC did weeks of research to find these and adjust the settings. Now he never uses them."
I followed him across the office to Robert's desk, trying to absorb details as I went. The floor was tiled in white-veined green marble, lightning-bolt shaped light fixtures zigzagged above the bookshelves on the south wall and two spotless white sofas flanked an oval glass table in the center of the office. A large amount of the room was totally empty, only sunlight and dust motes spiraling in the air.
"So the desk has six distinct zones arranged from left to right. The computer is in zone 1, so are 3 blue Sanford pens. Whenever we're up here, we have to check the zones. Now he never uses them."
The computer's screen was four times the size of a normal laptop's, the keyboard thin and white. He uncapped the three pens to the left of the keyboard and tested each on a pad of paper pulled from his pocket.
"Good, pens work. They go six inches to the left of the top right corner of the keyboard. The pens should form a right angle with the edge of the desk. Technically this isn't possible, since the desk is an oval, but at any given point you can create the effect of the perpendicular. Hamilton actually explained this in some mathematical detail in an email he sent to all PCs with office access. I only stress the right angles because if the pen angle is wrong when he comes in, you'll get an email about it. He'll email Kate - 6 degree error in pen placement! - and she'll call you in and rape you, so to speak. Also in zone one, the mouse pad is four inches from the bottom right corner of the screen, and the photo of the kids and Susan is 12 inches to the left and four behind the left side of the screen."
He got out a ruler from his pocket and quickly checked the locations of pens, mouse pad, photo.
"This is fine. At least for a while if anything is wrong they'll blame me or Suzy, not you. We don't have time to go over all the zones today, but you'll catch on soon enough. The center of zone 3 is always clear. That's where he eats lunch when he's in the office. At the edge of zone 4 is a small jar of M&Ms. No blue ones, he doesn't like those. That's in zone four because he gets cravings for sweets in the afternoon and zones 3-6 are temporal as well as functional. Meaning he works on items in those zones at certain times of day. Technically all you need to know now is
that briefing folders go at the right edge of zone two, but the sooner you learn the rest of it the better."
He took the folder with the documents Suzy printed and placed it in an area of unoccupied space in the second zone of the desk. The zones were delineated by pencil-thin gaps between the glass of adjoining sections.
"Whenever PCs deliver an item to the office, we have a checklist of other things to do, time permitting. First thing on the list is parachutes."
I followed him from the desk to the couches and table in the center of the room. It was like taking a tour of a foreign city, David cast as the amiable local host.
"After 9/11 Robert was concerned about safety. Natural enough. He wanted a plan, a system, something to put his mind at ease, which if you know his mind is not a simple task. But the solution was simple: parachutes. A plane hits the building, he straps in and drifts to safety. We had a physics guy model a simulation given Robert's weight, the building height, certain wind conditions. We had ex-pentagon consultants advising on varying models of military parachutes. We did everything right. Robert approved the proposal and parachutes were mounted on fixtures on the windows, one every thirty feet. He thought this would inspire confidence in guests, colleagues, potential investors. But of course people were terrified. They're sitting on a couch at the top of a skyscraper looking at parachutes, what do they think about? It didn't make them more confident, it made them think about where they were, what could happen, about death. Not to mention the unfortunate metaphors about parachutes in a financial context. So people started making jokes, Robert was furious, we took them down. Now they're stashed inside the cushions on the north couch."
He picked up one of the white cushions, pulled a thin cord on its bottom and revealed a green backpack inside. He pulled it out, tugged two shoulder straps, opened a zipped compartment, turned it over and yanked on a cord.
"We'll go over how to check these later, for now I'll just do them quick."
He did the same procedure on three other cushions, then replaced and patted them.
"You'll probably read about parachutes in the case studies. It's classic Hamilton & Co. behavior - every aspect of the parachute problem that could be quantified, graphed or predicted was done perfectly. Then something human and irrational intervenes. Robert has this myth of reason. You know Goya's painting The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters? So the obvious meaning is when reason goes to sleep bad shit happens, but another possibility is that the monsters are inherent in reason, at least when taken to extremes."
I could see how he'd gotten a job here.
"Anyway, he was shocked that people didn't feel safer, which would have been a strictly rational response. The conclusion in the case study is that more attention should be paid to social and psychological factors. No shit, huh?"
"What are case studies?"
"Suzy will explain."
We began walking back to the door of the office. I took a last look at the sun on the Hudson, the George Washington bridge distant in the haze, the light filling the deep crevices between buildings in the financial district.
As we walked back past the painting in the lobby he gestured to it.
"You want my take on the Pollock painting? It's not a display of wealth, not some status symbol. And I don't think he's genuinely interested in art, so it's not that either. He bought it after a
conversation with a professor at NYU who had used a computer program to model mathematical structures in Pollock's paintings. Guy sketched some equations that describe Pollock's work on a cocktail napkin. Robert was sold. He loved it. It's the spectacle of reason triumphing over apparent disorder. That's what appeals to him."
Flushed with the glow of successfully delivering Mr. Hamilton's carrots, Kate arrived back at the office shortly after I finished a turkey sandwich for lunch. Her office was on the 50th floor, a sort of shack beside the mansion of Hamilton's office. But when she descended from the 50th to the 47th floor, everything changed. Even experienced PCs would stammer and misspeak in her presence. The 47th floor had a lazy lunchtime calm she instantly shattered. Her small figure caused a flurry of activity; people's posture improved, their hands flew over keyboards, or at least flew to minimize whatever website they'd been perusing over a cup of lentil soup. The only person who seemed immune to her influence was David. He stayed reclined in his chair, one leg crossed over the other, reading a copy of the New York Times.

She wanted me to spend the afternoon reading case studies. The first section in the case studies binder was titled Household Affairs.

**Description of Problem:** Robert was not satisfied with the smoothness of his shirts. Two PCs were tasked with finding a solution to this problem. They generated two hypotheses: the first held that the brand and material of his shirts was inherently less smooth than other comparable brands that could be substituted without a decrease in aesthetic quality. The second hypothesis was that the problem was the dry cleaning method used on the shirts. To test these conjectures, one PC spent a morning shopping at Lord & Taylor, Brooks Brothers and Bloomingdales. He compared weave patterns, Egyptian to regular cotton, and sample shirts to a control brought from the household. The other PC called dry cleaners throughout the city and inquired about methods of cleaning that could increase smoothness without compromising cleanliness. The first PC bought four shirts with potentially superior smoothness and brought them to the household for Robert to try. He dismissed three on aesthetic grounds, and felt the ostensible smoothness of the fourth was "negligible." The second PC struggled to find dry cleaners who spoke English as a first language. Eventually several English-speaking dry cleaners were located, but they had no advice about alternate cleaning methods. One recommended washing the shirts until the material became softer and smoother through repeated washing.

It was approaching 3 in the afternoon, and no solution had been found. The PCs began washing a shirt and left instructions for the night staff to continue washing. Robert would need the shirt by 8 the following morning. Each wash cycle lasted twenty minutes, so leaving time for drying and ironing, 48 wash cycles were possible. One of the two PCs arrived at 7 the next morning and confirmed with night staff that the shirt had been washed continually throughout the night. The shirt was dried and ironed. By 7:45 it was hung on the leftmost corner of the southeast rack in Robert's dressing closet. A post-it note was affixed to the sleeve explaining that the shirt "had undergone a procedure" to maximize smoothness.

Robert called the dedicated household line at 8:05 and asked for an explanation as to the nature of the procedure. He was concerned about the possible use of certain chemical agents that might increase smoothness but pose health risks. The call wasn't answered by the PC tasked with the
shirt problem, and the PC who answered the call was unable to find a PC with any knowledge of the project. She told Robert she wasn’t sure what procedure the shirt had undergone. Robert expressed frustration. He declined to wear the shirt and left the household in an older shirt. The PC with knowledge of the shirt situation returned to the household with a bagel and coffee. She learned what had happened and emailed Robert. The next day he wore the shirt and reported satisfaction with its smoothness. He asked that the method be applied to all his shirts, and that the number of washes per shirt be increased to 100 to confer the optimal benefit.

**Conclusions:** The PC who delivered the shirt used imprecise language in her explanatory note and thus left room for Robert to doubt the possible side-effects of the softening method. She then left the residence without anticipating that Robert might have questions about her work. PCs need to provide clear explanations without excessive detail (Robert's time is too valuable to have to read irrelevancies). PCs also need to remain present until after the completion of a given task. Multiple PCs should always be aware of the details of a given task or situation, so that Robert can be accommodated with maximum speed and efficiency. It is the responsibility of the PC tasked with a given problem to communicate relevant information to other PCs on duty.

I read dozens of case studies that day. I read about the quest to achieve the optimal degree of brownness on a piece of toast, the herculean efforts to child-proof every room for Joseph, the preferred arrangement of shoes in Robert's dressing area, the seasonal rotation of coats in the atrium hall closet. Late in the afternoon Kate summoned me to her office on the 50th floor.

"I trust you're making progress on the case studies?"

I nodded. She was British, terrifying.

"There are a few things you should know right away. First, the non-disclosure agreement that you signed extends to QAs. They should know as little about the family's personal affairs and the work we do as possible. To that end, sensitive work is done at the household office. At this location, we do research and recruiting, but nothing potentially compromising. No phone calls about projects or tasks involving the family. Even reading case studies at this location is unusual."

She liked to refer to the Hamiltons as “the family.” It was weirdly ominous, like they were some vast and powerful criminal network. I soon noticed that other PCs did the same thing, it was a collective verbal tic, nowhere specifically required but universally followed. Eventually I began to feel that "the family" had subsumed all others, had monopolized the possible meanings of the words. If someone told me they spent a weekend with the family I'd picture the Hamiltons. But that first afternoon I had nothing yet to picture. I'd seen Robert's office, read about his preferences in shirt smoothness and toast color, but I'd never seen him.

"Tomorrow," Kate said, "You'll report to the residence. At that point you’ll have access to all the relevant paperwork, but today I’ll brief you quickly on the task."

"The task" sounded as frighteningly vague as “the family.” I was also starting to notice a pervasive militancy in office diction. Kate needed a “position” to establish her “intercept point,” I was “reporting” to the residence in the morning. I almost wanted to salute her.

“This task is somewhat of a challenge. Several PCs have already taken a look at the problem, none has found a solution. It’s fairly high on the priority list. Robert has already made a second request for a report on potential solutions. I do not want him to have to make a third.”
I could already imagine my blunders being catalogued in a case study; perhaps my true value would be as a cautionary tale to future PCs.

“Tomorrow you’ll get around a dozen manuals for household appliances - a dishwasher, a microwave, a mini-fridge, etc. The problem is a phantom noise. No one can pinpoint its source. Its frequency and duration are erratic. It’s a faint sound, almost inaudible. A low thrumming noise, a faint babbling. The industry term for the phenomenon is appliance murmur. It can be caused by a single appliance, or by the interactions of many in close proximity. Your task is to identify the source of the murmur and find a way to eliminate the noise.”

She stared at me. I tried to look like my whole life had been a preparation for this, my true calling, the eradication of appliance murmur.

“Great.”

“Since this is your first task,” she began, and I was already relieved. I assumed she’d say something about extra support, tolerance of mistakes, etc. Instead, she said this:

“It’s important for you to prove you belong here - there are thousands of people who want to be in your shoes. If you fail, maybe one of them will be.”
CHAPTER 12

The residence was in the East 70s. The building was smaller than I expected but still larger than everything else on the block. A doorman was hosing down the sidewalk under the awning and effusively cooing at the small children and dogs that came out of the building's revolving glass doors. I checked in at the front desk and was told someone would be down to greet me in a few minutes. So I settled into a comfortable leather chair near the door and watched the doorman do his work. He was densely muscled, thick-chested. When children or poodles approached he lowered his body and raised his voice and began cooing endearments. "Look who's wearing a new sweater?!!" He gushed as a toy poodle in a snug red body-sweater and four tiny blue paw-shoes pranced past. "He gets cold from October on," said an elderly dessicated woman. Whenever a man in a suit exited the building he would smile and address him with a warm "Good morning, Mr. ___" Some would smile back and nod, others just nodded and hurried out the door. He would compliment kids on their lunchbox or shoes or hold out his hand for a high-five. In the lulls when no one was coming or going from the building, he wandered from the front door to the reception desk and leaned against it, cursing in a mixture of English and Spanish. The guy behind the desk waved his hands around and struck his palm against his forehead as if appalled at the idiocy of the doorman. They were talking baseball. I had a way of picking up the curse words and terms for body parts in other languages, and I was fairly certain the doorman was talking about the testicles of the desk clerk's mother when an old woman teetered into sight and began walking across the lobby. The doorman's face transformed instantly. He looked at the old woman as if she were a naughty but lovable infant who had just stolen a piece of chocolate. Then he did a sort of skip across the lobby to hold the door for her. "Now, you have a good day Mrs. Jones!" Her head was bent forward on her neck and she was drooling slightly. A driver was opening the door of a black town car at the curb. Next came a Mr. Bernard. I watched the doorman greet maybe 30 people. He was a master of facial and vocal metamorphoses; he could calibrate his tone to suggest just the right degree of delight at a toddler's matching hat and gloves, or the perfect mingling of deference and familiarity in his 'good morning' to a young executive. After each greeting he resumed his stream of insult and casual curses in Spanish.

The lobby was dimly lit by chandeliers dangling from the high ceiling. Their light played across the cream-colored marble floor and blended with the weak fall sunlight filtering through the doors. The flow of morning activity was slowing and a second smaller doorman had appeared with a mop and begun polishing the floor, leaving glistening half-moon patterns that quickly evaporated. "Yo Joe," I heard the large doorman say. I turned and saw a small boy charging across the lobby, brandishing a plastic sword. "Joseph! Watch the wet floor!" A girl in her early twenties called as she chased after him. A sulky girl in her teens watched the scene.
The boy had truly enormous cheeks. They jiggled as he charged across the lobby, his brow furrowed into a grimace of seemingly genuine rage. He made a high-pitched war cry as he ran. The girl in her twenties was chasing after him, her hands full of plastic baggies and mittens and kids' books. A patch of wet floor separated him from the doorman, who noticed the girl's pursuit and called out.

"Yo Joe, careful of the floor big man." The girl wasn't going to catch him before he got to the wet spot. The big doorman darted forward with surprising speed, crossed the wet section and met the boy's charge with good-natured cries of simulated fear and terror. The boy seemed oblivious of everything but his attack, which consisted of chopping at the knees and lower thighs of the doorman while making a buzzing noise with his lips. The girl in her twenties looked too young to be a mother. There was also a formality in the way she approached the boy after his attack had subsided and asked if he would please put on his sweater. The teenage girl joined them and stood watching as the nanny helped the boy into his sweater. I thought of an anecdote someone told me about a wide-eyed girl new to the city who spends an afternoon on the Upper West side and, mistaking nannies for mothers, exclaims over how many Black and Hispanic woman had adopted white children.

"Hey pappi, HEY, pappi- yeah you can go up to the 11th floor, they just called down."
I'd never been called Pappi before.
Kate answered when I rang the doobell on the 11th floor. She seemed to consider greetings superfluous; she just gave me a faintly accusing stare and began talking.
"Bit of a crazy morning. The kids just left with Jennifer, one of their nannies, and we had to get Robert out the door a few minutes before that. Next time just come up sooner, we could have used the help."
She was already walking away from me down a hallway. It was an apartment converted into an office space, an odd mingling of corporate and domestic. I'd never seen anything quite like it. I was expecting some gleaming corporate perfection, not homey domestic clutter. At the end of the hallway was a large room with a brick fireplace on one wall and a set of desks and computers running along the opposite wall. A few PCs glanced up from the screens, introduced themselves, went back to work. In a tone that suggested there would be a quiz later, Kate gave me a tour of the apartment. There was a small kitchen, a storage room that held filing cabinets, soccer balls, tricycles, board games, and dozens of stuffed animals. These were some of the kids' toys that hadn't yet been moved to storage. Kate's office was in a small bedroom that held a single bed with white sheets neatly folded and a large desk beneath a window overlooking the street.

She led me down another hallway, delivering a steady stream of information as we walked. The apartment had an entire bedroom for staff to sleep in. There were bunk-beds along three walls and phones mounted on the walls beside each bunk. At the end of the hall we came to the emergency supply room, where hundreds of cans of food were arranged on metal shelves by type and order of expiration date. Canned peaches, pears, beans, chocolate, soups, chili, all of it organic. There were even bins of Ghirardelli hot chocolate and fresh bagels with lox and cream cheese. Most sections of the food supplies were re-stocked every few months, whenever the items were scheduled to expire. A vast spreadsheet monitored dates of purchase, quantities and types of food, dates of expiration. Whenever a given food dipped below a target number, an automatic reminder to re-stock was generated and sent to all PC staff emails. Usually the most junior PC on staff was tasked with replenishing supplies. A second spreadsheet catalogued precise preferences
for brands and sizes of items and listed the stores in NYC where they could be purchased. The logic behind the supply system, Kate explained with pleasure, was based on hospital inventory software models that used target quantities and re-supply trigger points to ensure that hospitals never ran out of essential supplies of medicines. The lox and bagels were re-stocked daily, since disaster could strike at any time. The quantity and variety of food ensured that after an emergency the family could eat a balanced diet of three meals a day for four months. The staff, I assumed, would be left to cannibalize one another.

The Hamiltons had three live-in nannies: one for each child and a third for weekends. Each nanny lived in her own apartment on the 12th floor. The building followed the standard superstition and skipped the 13th floor. The 14th, I learned, held two guest apartments that were kept in a constant state of readiness for the Hamilton's friends, family and important colleagues who happened to be passing through New York. A third apartment on the 14th floor had been converted into a state-of-the-art exercise room with machines that allowed Robert to touch-type his thoughts into tablets. The 15th floor presented, in Kate's words, something of a dilemma. The Hamiltons owned all of the apartments on floors 11-16 except for a single unit on the 15th that they had been unable to acquire. They were very interested in the property, but the owner, an older woman, had refused their most extravagant offers. I would see the apartments on other floors in due time, she told me, as my duties would often involve working in the Hamilton's apartment on the 16th floor.

After showing me through the staff apartment on 11, Kate disappeared into her office. I skimmed through some more case studies, then just sat at a desk in the living room and thought about how much money I was making to sit there. I was trying to divide $140,000 by the working hours in a year when I remembered the phantom noise. Kate hadn't given me any manuals, but given the whole emphasis on independent problem solvers who stomp on artificial fires, maybe I was supposed to just ask.

Periodically Kate would burst out of her office and descend on one of the PCs with a barrage of precise questions about the dimensions or type of coolant of a certain model of refrigerator they were considering placing in one of the guest apartments on 14.

Late in the morning Kate came out and handed me a yellow post-it with a phone number. "Call that number and order a dozen roses for Robert. Have them delivered to the residence immediately."
I called the number, placed my order, gave his name and address. Kate stood a few feet away, watching me. When I hung up the phone she just stared at me.
"Do you realize what just happened?"
"I just ordered flowers."
"You just ordered flowers for ROBERT HAMILTON and you gave out his PERSONAL ADDRESS TO A STRANGER!"
"I'm sorry. I thought that was what you asked..."
"Do you realize what this MEANS?"
"I'm afraid I don't."
The other PCs were discreetly watching my evisceration. I'd read somewhere that predators
become more enraged when their prey appears lifeless, that fighting back mitigates the ferocity of the assault. Instinct told me to play dead anyway. I made a contrite, worried face, as if my foolishness were a lamentable burden to those of a superior breed, the Kates of the world.

"I guess you read more slowly than I thought. You ought to have finished the last of the case studies by now. If you had, you would have read about the necessity of an alias for Robert. We never use his name in connection with this address when dealing with contractors or vendors or even many colleagues. Except to family and close friends, his name is James Bernard. There could have been serious consequences if you'd called an actual flower shop and given his real name and address. Fortunately you called Suzy at the downtown office. So just consider this a test. One you didn't pass."

She turned abruptly and walked back to her office. The three PCs hunched closer to their computer screens. So that was the Mr. Bernard I’d seen the doorman greet in the lobby that morning.

After a few months I began to expect these kinds of tricks and tests, but on my second day it was a surprise. She'd never told me Hamilton had an alias, she hadn't even told me to read the entire book of case studies. Then she'd designed a test she knew I would fail and scolded me in front of the other PCs. She'd even seemed to enjoy it. I soon learned the purpose of these tests wasn't to ensure that PCs had some particular bit of knowledge. It was to create a certain attitude, an anxious vigilance and attentiveness that was meant to improve our performance. Failing was expected. The actual test was whether you responded to failure by developing the right attitude toward your work. Most PCs did, a few quit, and one turned out like David.
CHAPTER 13

I spent the rest of the day madly reading through more case studies to try to avoid another trap. Most of the descriptions were excruciatingly dull discussions of the intricacies of various air-conditioner systems some PC had researched for months or the rationale behind the placement of sprinklers in the backyard of the Hamilton’s summer home in Westchester.

Late in the afternoon I found one with an intriguing title.

**Refrigerator Alarm System:**

**Description:** Robert suggested that Susan’s weight loss goal might be assisted by the installation of an alarm system on the refrigerator. Two PCs were tasked with researching possible options. Due to the sensitive nature of the issue of weight loss, Robert asked that PCs not mention the project to Susan until Robert approved a system. The difficulties are almost too obvious to need enumeration. But in the interest of clarity and full exposition, the PCs were constrained by the following concerns. First, other family members would still need access to the refrigerator. Second, Susan would still need access to certain foods in the refrigerator at certain times. Third, the alarm would need to be discreet enough that the children were not aware of its presence. While an alarm system could conceivably lock the doors of the refrigerator in the event of an unauthorized access attempt, this would necessitate a locking mechanism, a keypad password or face/fingerprint recognition technology. The system could also be programmed to lock the doors during certain time periods, but not only are Robert’s snacking habits erratic, Susan could also adjust the times she snacked to fit the allotted hours. The alarm system could also consist of a noise that sounded if Susan opened the doors more than a certain number of times. This possibility has the advantage of removing the chance of lock malfunctions, though its effectiveness would depend on the deterrent power of whatever noise occurred when Susan attempted unauthorized access. Too loud a noise would alert and confuse the children.

The PCs investigated what if any solutions were already on the market. Certain refrigerators they found had locking doors and a few gag gifts could be placed on the inside of the refrigerator to make the sound of a police siren whenever the doors were opened. The two PCs generated a possible custom solution and proposed it to Robert. They suggested that a bracelet could contain a chip that a sensor inside the refrigerator would recognize. Each time the person wearing the bracelet opened the door, the system would register the data. A set number of entries could be allowed per day. After exceeding the limit of entries on a day, the bracelet would communicate a pulse of heat to the skin of the wrist. It could also activate a locking mechanism that would automatically deactivate once the bracelet moved more than a few feet from the central unit inside the door.

Robert approved the plan in theory but asked if it were feasible. The PCs tried to locate contractors with specialties in electronics and computing. They found two companies that would do the project. One with a guarantee and a higher price, one without a guarantee and a lower
price. The PCs chose the first company and asked for testable prototypes within two weeks. After six weeks a bracelet and control panel were prepared. The system was tested on the staff refrigerator in 11B and no problems were reported. The bracelet was placed in Robert's office inbox with an explanatory email and the control panel was mounted. An email was sent to the nannies and the chef explaining what the black box mounted on the inside of the door was. Robert explained the system to Susan and presented her with the bracelet. She expressed dissatisfaction with its appearance ("looks like a manacle") and voiced concern about possibly dangerous malfunctions on the heat sensors on the bracelet. Robert asked the PCs what safety guarantees the company could offer. The PCs had designed the bracelet with a maximum possible temperature that would not pose any health risks. Robert asked for quantifiable standards, such as a temperature scale or heat units per surface area of skin. The PCs had only requested that the bracelet have two settings: mild and medium.

Susan rejected offers to provide more aesthetically pleasing alternatives and wore the bracelet. The bracelet and control unit were programmed to allow access three times per day. At noon one day Susan's on-call PC received a call from Susan, who told her she’d only opened the fridge once but that the bracelet was administering pulses of warmth and the fridge would not open. She expressed annoyance and the desire to eat her lunch. The on-call PC was not sure whether there had been a malfunction or whether Susan had already exceeded her daily access limit and was lying. Rather than responding to Susan’s request to fix the bracelet, she emailed Robert and asked how she should proceed. Before Robert had replied, Kate instructed the PC to obey Susan at once. Testing revealed that the command unit had been activated by proximity and had mistakenly logged an access attempt whenever Susan walked past the refrigerator. Susan removed and stomped on the bracelet. The project was closed until further notice.

**Conclusions:** The first error was the PCs’ choice to present Robert with a plan before they had investigated its feasibility. In order to save Robert's time, he should only be asked to consider proposals that are real possibilities rather than mere hypotheticals. Contractors and outside consultants should be required to give precise time estimates on the work they perform. If they exceed their completion date, their fees should be reduced. The PCs also neglected to consider the aesthetic aspect of the bracelet - this is a grievous oversight. Appearances are almost always a factor, particularly for Susan. Testing of the alarm system was woefully incomplete. Not only was it tested in the staff apartment rather than the residence, but simple malfunctions were not anticipated. Finally, Susan's on-call PC questioned the truth of Susan's complaint in an email to Robert and delayed before attending to the problem. Requests by all family members should be obeyed as quickly as possible. While the particular circumstances may have made the decision to delay and contact Robert seem reasonable, it was a serious miscalculation to think the possible harm that would have been caused by responding instantly if Susan had exceeded her limit was greater than the good of responding instantly to a request that there was no apparent reason to disbelieve. More fundamentally, it is not the place of PCs to make evaluative judgements about the truthfulness of statements or requests from family members, it is their place to obey those requests.

I was beginning to understand the type of work PCs did. They researched and compared various models of refrigerators for the Hamilton's guest apartments, they searched for longitudinal studies
on the effects of different brands of dog food on the health of golden retrievers. (Robert’s father owned one). They created light-bulb placement schemes for the Hamilton’s apartment that tried to maximize light and minimalize the visibility of the light fixtures. They updated spreadsheets that documented expiration dates for various light bulbs and conducted periodic preemptive bulb swaps to ensure the Hamiltons were never without light. They tested and screened various educational computer games for the kids and ranked them along various indices like entertainment value, type of cognitive skill developed, method of instruction, quality of visuals, implicit values conveyed. They applied a formula Robert had devised to determine the optimal order of music on his iPod playlists.

Robert seemed to think that no aspect of his life was too minute or trivial for intense rational scrutiny: the location of the NY Times in the kitchen should be designed to maximize ease of access for Robert and be out of Joseph’s reach, the length of bristles on his toothbrush should be evaluated by leading dentists, the rate they lose firmness measured, a system for preemptive replacement of toothbrushes developed. The PCs attempted to anticipate his objections and apply his methods of systematic inquiry, but inevitably there were oversights. The conclusions of the case studies noted these errors and omissions. One PC had neglected to consider the effect that the width of shoe-laces would have on ease of tying, another had not adequately researched the effects of various office chairs on lower back pain. The studies were descriptive and prescriptive, narrative and exhortation. They were fables from some alternate world.

That afternoon I found out more about some of the other PCs. One had a doctorate in art history from Stanford, one had dropped out of a masters in comparative literature at Columbia, one had a doctorate in philosophy from Duke. Now they preemptively changed lightbulbs, devised alarm systems for refrigerators, checked the salinity of Joseph’s aquarium. The office was a graveyard for advanced degrees in the humanities. My coworkers looked depressed, stressed, terrified, or all of the above. Where were the brilliant people in strong sunlight I’d seen on the website?
CHAPTER 14

The next day I ventured inside the Hamiltons’ apartment for the first time. Each day a printout of the family's schedule was taped on the wall behind the row of computers on the 11th floor office. Two color-coded columns listed Robert and Susan's events from 6:00 AM to 9 PM. Joseph and Leah shared a third column. The schedule was stunningly crowded, each column crammed with activity. Many of Robert's hours were divided into units of 15 or even 10 minutes. PCs were always supposed to do their work in the crevices on the schedule, the small openings when no family member was scheduled to be in the residence and no one would be bothered or disturbed by our presence. That day Robert had thirty minutes with his yoga trainer at 1:30, followed by 15 minutes of light massage. Then he would return to the office for a series of meetings. The kids were at school until 4, and Susan was shopping until 3:30. This meant the other PCs and I had until 3:15 to do any work in the Hamilton's apartment.

Since I was still in my probationary period, I was supposed to be supervised by one of the other PCs. Four of us rode up in the elevator around 2:30. We had 45 minutes in the apartment before Susan would arrive. The other PCs had clipboards, screw-drivers, spare tubes of toothpaste. They fanned out as soon as we entered the apartment and began checking inventory in numerous closets, re-arranging pillows, testing the intercom system.

"Keep an eye on time, and think twice before you touch anything," the Stanford art history girl said over her shoulder as she walked away. So I wouldn’t be supervised after all.

Since my task was to identify the source of a mysterious noise, I had a plausible excuse for wandering throughout the entire apartment. It soon became clear that it was not simply an apartment. It was the entire 16th floor. Three separate apartments had been merged into a single unit with views on every side. Like Robert's office downtown, the windows were floor-to-ceiling. There was the flame-colored foliage of Central Park to the west, Harlem and the downtown skyline to the north and south. The first room I saw was the living room. Later I learned the technical names of the "zones" in the residence that all PCs used to avoid ambiguity. Living room and family room have variable meanings, so some enterprising PC changed the names to L1 and L2. L1 was lined with bookshelves on two walls. The shelves reached almost to the ceiling and a wooden stepladder rolled on hinges so that you could retrieve a book from any point on the shelves. Most of the books were textbooks and treatises on number theory, calculus, physics. There was the obligatory shelf devoted to culture, the Riverside Shakespeare, Greek and Roman myths, but the vast majority of books were about things I didn't remotely understand.

Two oversized sofas formed a right angle and looked deliciously comfortable, with huge, thick cushions the color of clouds. Soft cotton throws were draped over each. The carpet was deep, soft plush, its cream-shade echoed the white of the couches and the walls. I guiltily touched the carpet and felt my hand sink into its folds; it felt like petting a wonderfully soft and shaggy dog. I
walked down a short hallway, turned a corner and found a PC on his knees in front of an open closet. Inside the closet were glass shelves holding rows of perfectly straight cosmetic items: lipstick, perfume, eye-shadow, eye-liner, foundation and a whole apothecary of creams and powders and ointments, most prominently displaying the French words for things like apricot, jasmine, honey, lily. The PC was muttering and consulting a spreadsheet that listed target quantities for each of the items. It seemed a minimum of eight items was standard for all the products.

The hallways were wide and spacious and high-ceilinged. The walls were perfectly white and whenever PCs saw even the slightest smudge of dirt they were trained to clean it instantly and thoroughly. Because all household cleaning products had to pass an extensive safety review by medical consultants, PCs were generally limited to the use of mild soap and warm water, which meant they did a lot of scrubbing. I passed a second PC on his knees at the edge of L2, a second living room, scrubbing at the marble, frowning and panting audibly as he worked. L2 had a sunken central area. I descended a few marble steps to a square of tessellated green and white marble in the middle of the room. After a few seconds I realized the floor was in the exact pattern of a chessboard. I glanced around for life-size pieces but saw only tan leather armchairs, glass end-tables, and abstract art on the gleaming white walls. I wandered through M2, a music room with a 9-foot Steinway grand piano, through B1 and B2, Joseph and Leah's bedrooms, through studies and dens and guest rooms and entertainment rooms.

The children's rooms had the sort of anonymous perfection of hotel rooms, the sheets folded at crisp angles, the carpet spotless and uncluttered, the desks with a few sharpened pencils next to a composition pad. There were certain small signs of human occupancy, like a monstrous crayon-sketch of a tree signed by Joseph and framed above his bed.

The closets were miraculous. They were hidden everywhere, in rooms and in hallways, their contents ordered with total precision. Rows of Joseph's shoes were arranged by size and season, boots grading into sneakers and sandals. One closet had stuffed animals sorted by size and species and color, another held a profusion of office supplies: rubber bands, paper clips, staplers, folders, pencils, pens, and notecards. In case the identity of the items was unclear, small laminated labels with the names of every thing were affixed to the shelf just below each item.

The same strange explicitness appeared throughout the apartment. Below a shelf with a stack of plates in K2 - the second kitchen - was a printed label that said: plates. It almost seemed like a joke, like something you would see at MOMA. A stack of forks labeled "forks." Crowds of sophisticates staring, pondering the meta-meanings. Periodically I recalled my task and stood still, head bent at an angle, listening for phantom hums and murmurs. The bedrooms were quiet except for the faint noise of wind from beyond the windows. L1 and L2 were silent; I heard my own breathing, the scrubbing and re-stacking of PCs. In K1, the first kitchen, I heard a sudsy rumble. I tracked it to a spot just south of a central marble island and found that the dishwasher was running.

Maybe I just wasn't listening carefully enough. I wandered back through the maze of rooms, straining to hear some scarcely perceptible noise. With some effort I could make out the sounds
of cars 16 stories below. In E1, the kids' entertainment room, the massive flat screen TV that covered half of one wall made that faint, piercing pitch of dormant electronics. Was this the dreaded phantom noise? At points I thought I heard a low thrumming vibration, but I wasn't sure if I was imagining the sound.

Certain rooms in the residence were flecked with yellow post-it notes taped to the walls at eye-level. The notes were in one of the kitchens, one of the studies, one of the bedrooms. "I will love how I look and feel when I reach my goal weight," one said. "The pleasure I get from being in control of my eating habits is greater than the pleasure I get from eating," another read. They were all variations on a theme. One simply said "I believe that I can and will reach my goal weight."

I wasn't sure that I'd covered the entire apartment when the other PCs told me we'd run out of time. Riding down in the elevator they griped about how hard it was to do all of their sweeps and checks in so little time.

I went back to my desk and found a folder stuffed with household appliance manuals. I poured through them for the rest of the afternoon but found nothing about murmuring appliances.
CHAPTER 15

When I first got the job, I figured that within a few weeks I would have gained the respect of my colleagues and superiors and begun a torrid affair with one of my most attractive female coworkers. But most of my colleagues seemed too worried about their own tasks to notice let alone respect me. And no sizzling affairs were on the verge of igniting.

I wanted experience - sex and suffering, something I could write about later. I wanted this to be the Bohemian debauchery chapter of the biography I was fantasizing some illustrious scholar would one day write about me. But my days were too orderly, they consisted of the grids of spreadsheets, the perfect arrangement of shampoo bottles in the guest apartments. Young writers didn't use spreadsheets, they wrote sonnets on opium, visited brothels in Istanbul, got into fist fights over abstractions. I knew I should be satisfied, but after a week of reading appliance manuals, I was struggling. I started having uncontrollable visions of myself at 45, pale and defeated, resigned to a life of data entry for Hamilton. I had to get experience while I still could, to accumulate as much as possible. I knew that enough experience would eventually lead to wisdom, fame and great art.

But as much as I liked the whole mythology of the chance encounter, the glance at a bookstore, the smile in the park, it wasn’t working. I’d been in NewYork for months and nothing.

So I began reading personal ads. I’d take my laptop and sit in the corner of my room that picked up a wireless signal and read the ads on various sites. Usually it was late at night and I’d hear the sounds of the photographer and one of his models screwing while I read. It was strange to hear someone having sex before actually meeting them. One of his more frequent visitors was a girl named Anne, a senior at NYU. I finally met her one Saturday morning when we both opened our bedroom doors at the same time. From her moans and panting I’d imagined a tall, slender girl, the kind whose face might be on the side of a bus next to a bottle of perfume. But she was short and plump and if used in any ad she would be wearing an apron and baking biscuits which her children would eat with smiles of domestic bliss. She introduced herself.
"I've heard you fucking so much I feel we're old friends," I wanted to say. Instead I told her I'd heard all about her.
"Really?" She sounded excited.
"Well, at least, I've, well, heard you."
They were quieter after that. A few weeks later the photographer thanked me.
"It's so much more exciting now," he said one day. He had a habit of starting a conversation as if resuming an older conversation, when in fact I often had no idea what he was referring to.
"What is?"
"With Anne, it's never been better. She's all worried about being heard, after what you said. So now it's like being back in high school, your parents asleep in the next room, it's great. You're like our parents."
"I could burst in one night and demand that you get off of my daughter."
"That's what it's all about, prohibitions, taboos. That makes shit hot."

I thought maybe I should try dating someone repressed, inhibited, a girl who'd been locked in her bedroom by religious parents for most of adolescence. There was a certain appeal, though she'd have to be questioning her beliefs, beginning to fall from grace. We'd read Bertrand Russell together, fuck madly, and her apostasy would be complete.

As I read more personal ads they began to resolve into types and categories, even genres. One popular genre was the wholesome-and-normal: "I'm just your average girl. I'm hard-working but also like to have fun. I love movies, romantic comedies especially! Not super athletic, but I try to keep in shape. Looking for someone who wants to share experiences and is open to a relationship." There were hundreds of variations on this theme, girls who seemed to make a virtue of their ordinariness. They used the broadest, most generic language possible to describe themselves. They usually alluded delicately to the fact that they wanted more than just fucking. Thus they also avoided lengthy descriptions of how scorchingly attractive they were (that was another genre). The question of bodily appearance was passed over in a few vague words: "I try to keep in shape." The images that flashed through my mind as I read this genre of ad were as bland and general as the sentences that created them. I saw slightly overweight girls cooking macaroni and cheese, watching romantic comedies, working as secretaries and accountants. I had trouble inserting myself into these reveries. Except for the sex. I could see myself having sex with them; it was everything else that was hard to imagine.

Another common genre of ad consisted of shameless and hyperbolic boasting. The defining feature of this genre was a wild degree of exaggeration, no matter how implausible: "I am an extremely intelligent person. I read, like, all the time. I'm tall, gorgeous, with flowing auburn hair and long legs. My personality is everything you could hope for - sassy, romantic, funny, sensitive, bubbly, kind and very deep. I'm looking for a man as amazing as me, for someone who can handle me, and isn't intimidated by greatness." Sometimes the people posting seemed to have realized that being both the source and subject of their assertions might not be entirely convincing. So they tried to gain a degree of objectivity by attributing claims to others. "My friends tell me I'm the smartest, funniest person they've ever met," or "Most guys are instantly attracted to me." Usually the more time someone devoted to descriptions of their attractiveness, the more open they were to casual sex. "My body is overwhelming - firm ass, flat stomach, long legs, nice tits, and the rest you'll just have to find out."

A small but distinct genre was definition-by-negation. It consisted of stating everything you didn't want: "If you are selfish or afraid to commit, don't bother replying. Ditto if you are arrogant, emotionally constipated, or shorter than 5'3." The psychic wounds from past relationships were all too nakedly obvious. "If your name is Richard, I can't date you. Also, no smokers and no pets. Beyond that, I'm open to meeting you."

Another common genre was the conspicuously quirky and particular. These ads tried to convey a sense of uniqueness; they were the opposite of the Wholesome and Normal type. "I wear blue socks, have a birthmark on my left pinky, love the taste of roast beef on rye, and still read Roald Dahl books, especially The Twits. If you haven't read Roald Dahl, there's not much hope for us."
Common to many genres was a formulaic disclaimer, "I'm not the kind of person who normally posts personal ads online." Or "I can't believe I'm using this site," "I never do this sort of thing," etc. It was like everyone posting personal ads had a collective image of the type of person who posts personal ads from which they wanted to distance themselves. They weren't the sort of people who did what they did. I didn’t think I’d ever use the sites either.

Then there were the aberrations, the bizarre and unusual ads that defied the standard types. "I will have mind-blowing sex with the first man to reply to this ad." Or "Please send a cover letter and resume describing your romantic qualifications." Or "Write a poem in iambic tetrameter on the subject of heartbreak and send it to me, the winning poet gets a date."

I knew there were sites that took a systematic, scientific approach. Long in-take surveys and questionnaires, precision matching based on prioritized preferences. Data from longitudinal studies on compatibility applied to my particular personality type and preferences. It didn't interest me, it was too Hamilton & Co, too frantic a clutching for control. I savored the anarchic mess of the ads on free websites, the haphazardness of browsing randomly. It was almost a way of preserving the feeling of a chance meeting.

At first I didn't respond to any ads. I wanted to preserve the illusion that I was simply studying the ads, an anthropologist doing field work.

But the wireless signal we stole from our neighbors suddenly vanished one night. So the next day at work I cautiously opened NYCdates.com. My desk was fairly exposed, someone walked past every few minutes to get to the staff kitchen. I opened several other windows as camouflage and adjusted the size of the dating window until it looked like a small pop-up. If I listened closely, I could almost always hear when someone was coming. I decided to reply to ads from all of the “genres” on the site. I wanted to experience the whole spectrum of dating in New York, from casual sex to old-fashioned courtship.

I began at the seamy, sex-starved end of the spectrum. The first ad I answered was titled “Looking for a good time.” The text of the ad made clear that the author’s idea of a good time was basically fucking. I wrote that I, too, was looking for a good time and suggested we meet. I was vaguely troubled by the possibility that the ad could have been posted by some middle school prankster, but the $39 subscription fee seemed designed to thwart all but the most persistent 12-year-olds.

Twenty minutes after I sent a message I got a reply with a photo attached. I clicked on the attachment and a girl wearing only a black bra and underwear straddling a huge stuffed tiger filled the screen. I closed the photo as fast as I could and glanced around trying not to look suspicious. No one seemed to notice a thing. In the body of the email were two words: Say when.

We spent the rest of the afternoon in sleazy banter. Her emails became increasingly pornographic and reached a high point around 4:30 when she sent an email telling me how desperately she wanted to lick every inch of my body. How’s tomorrow? I wrote back.

David was always wandering over to my desk with no particular purpose. I looked up just before
five, and saw him staring at me with a faint smile.

“Hey there, tiger, let’s grab a drink.” he said just before five.
We walked three blocks to a bar. I’d never been before but David knew the waiter. They shook hands as we walked in and found a table. “Interesting thing that guy told me once,” David said, “bars in this neighborhood can predict their daily sales gross by looking at the market - a major drop and the place is full of brokers drinking.”
We ordered a pitcher of dark German beer and drank from cold, tall glasses.
“So I’m sitting at my desk and I think, I should go bother someone. I walk over to you, and what do I see? A nude girl on a tiger.”
“It was supposed to be classified, but Robert asked me to research potential mistress options.”
“Fuck you - there’s no way.”
I smiled.
“That used to be the joke about Susan - Robert puts NEED A WIFE at the top of the PC task list and a few months later they come back and present Susan.”
We sipped our dark beers.
“You want an apartment?”
"Huh?
Hamilton owned apartments all over Manhattan. It was something most staffers didn’t know, but a few people who handled the properties had keys and access. This was all completely off the record, he said, but if I ever wanted a place to bring someone, this could be arranged.
I nodded.
“A few things to know. First, you’re a friend of David Patrick’s, you say that to the doorman.
Second, you tip the doorman fifty bucks. The place on east 33rd is the most furnished, but it’s still minimal. I’ll give you the keys tomorrow. Last thing to know is that these places are checked periodically. Nobody will burst in on you, but every few months a cleaning service comes. If they notice anything too unusual, blood or whatever, there will be questions, so be a bit careful.
"Blood?"
"You never know."
"This is what, American Psycho?"
He grinned.
“Why does he have these places?”
“Same principle as the extra pairs of shoes. They were all purchased as possible residences, but rejected for one reason or another. Now he just keeps them as back-ups. Maybe the kids will live there when they are older.”
“How many are there?”
“Four.”
“Great, I’ll get the keys tomorrow?”
“Tomorrow it is.”
I didn’t realize the first girl was a prostitute until she asked me for money. Somehow I assumed she was just insanely attracted to me. But as soon as she asked it made sense: the picture with the tiger, the basically pornographic emails, the willingness to come to a strange apartment late at night. When she arrived, she slipped off an overcoat and pressed against me. She was short and slender and wore a tiny black skirt and a white tank top.

Maybe two minutes later she was naked and straddling me on the living room floor. She used her mouth to slip a condom on me and started moaning loudly. Then she was screaming “fuck me” and soon the whole thing was over. The whole encounter had been maybe ten minutes. “300,” she said, slipping back into her clothes.

“What?”
I thought I’d misheard her.
“It’s 300,” she said again. “You want to meet some of my friends?”
I got my wallet and gave her the money. She put a card on the table and left. It was a small white business card with a phone number printed in the center above the words Executive Encounters.

I knew this wasn’t a good idea. I should tear up the card and forget it ever happened. I should have a wholesome, normal relationship stuffed with homemade brownies and romantic comedies, or I should find an older mistress to initiate me into sinuous erotic truths. Really anything would be better than hiring a whore. But I liked the notion of myself as bold, reckless, carousing. And what about Flaubert’s whoring in Istanbul, Garcia Marquez’s visits to brothels in Colombia? I felt this was an essential experience, a rite of literary passage. I imagined each encounter was a step towards some dark enlightenment. I felt an artistic duty to excess of all sorts - brawling, whoring, drinking. This was what young artists did. I even liked the word whoring: it sounded coarse and vital. It made me think of 19th century whalers back from months at sea, landing in some forsaken coastal village, going whoring. This was what I wanted: to get down to the dirty roots of things. I saw myself in late middle-age at a wooden desk in strong sunlight, shaping the chaos of youth into some perfect order.

In the next two weeks I slept with four girls and spent over $3,000. There was the $50 for the doorman each time I used the apartment, and an $800 shopping spree with David that gave me a new wardrobe. Then there were the costs of the girls, usually $600 - $800 per executive encounter.

Each time I called the number on the card a cheerful female voice answered and asked “Would you like some company?” Then she asked if I had any preferences or if I wanted a surprise. I would ask for a surprise, give an address and a time and a girl would arrive. The girls were young, attractive and efficient. They seemed to calibrate their behavior to satisfy a generic male fantasy of gasps and moans and pleas not to stop. None were bothered by the absence of furniture in the east 33rd apartment: they just pulled me to the floor, let me press them against a wall, or in
one case, prop them on the kitchen counter. Their clothes came off with dizzying speed. At the slightest touch clothes seemed to literally fly from their bodies.

I felt guilty after each encounter, but I savoured the guilt. I hadn't gotten to brawling yet, but whoring and drinking I had down. One seemed to lead to the other. Usually I'd call the number on the white card after several shots in a bar in the West Village. Sometimes I drank with David, other nights with the painter and the photographer. I'd order a girl, order a half dozen shots, then go reeling in a cab to East 33rd.

Every time I wanted to grasp the particular essence of the girl, to place it in a mental catalogue for later artistic use. But whatever I did to their bodies, the girls stayed as elusive and impersonal as the voice that answered the phone service.

On the cab rides uptown I always felt that this would be the transformative experience, the night of erotic epiphany. But in the mornings all I remembered was a blur of limbs and moans. To do the sorts of things I wanted to experience I had to be drunk to the point that later I could barely remember the things I'd wanted to experience in the first place. It felt a bit like tourism - cramming myself full of new experiences but always aware that this wasn't my life, and I'd have to return eventually.

It was the duty of a writer to have new experiences at any cost, including the cost of $600 an hour charged by Executive Encounters. I'd never had sex in the bathroom of a bar before, so one night I gave the East village address of a bar instead of the 33rd street apartment. Thirty minutes later a girl arrived. She had short dark hair and wore a strapless red dress. We had a few shots of scotch and I led her back to the bathroom.

"200 more," she said calmly "we might get caught."

Two minutes later we were in a graffiti-covered stall, her legs wrapped around my waist, her dress hiked up around her stomach, her back pressed against the side of the stall. It shook with each thrust and a few times we almost toppled onto the toilet.

That was my fourth and final experience with a prostitute. I sat down one night and tried to write, hoping all the experiences had composted into some rich fertile muck that would send great prose shooting skyward. I gave up after a few hours of staring at the blank page.

I was thousands of dollars poorer and no closer to any earth-shaking epiphanies.

For the next few weeks I had a constant low-grade fear that I'd see one of the girls somewhere in the city. Ordering coffee, or takeout Chinese. I didn't fear a scene or public denunciation, what I feared would be worse. Just a glance, a recognition, a look of pure disgust before she disappeared into the mobs along Fifth Avenue.
CHAPTER 17

Despite terrible hangovers and a constant nagging guilt, I learned a great number of things over the next few weeks. Some things, like the fact that Robert's underwear were taken from the dryer just moments before he finished his shower each morning at 10:15 so he could put them on while they were warm, I would have preferred not to know. There was a strange mix of intimacy and anonymity in the work. I learned all the foods the family ate, the lotion they used on their skin, the computer games the kids liked to play, yet because of the rule that we did our work only when the residence was vacant, I hardly ever saw them. Their only reality was in their things: the tooled leather of Robert's briefcase, the Egyptian cotton of his socks, the Tunisian cotton of his shirts.

Most days I was sent out to a bagel shop in the east 60s to replenish the supply of lox and bagels in the emergency food room. I ordered six poppy, three sesame bagels and a half-pound of lox. I threw out the previous day's supply and replaced it with a fresh one.

I spent most of my first month shadowing other PCs on their daily routines. Different PCs were responsible for different things, but everyone was cross-trained in case "someone gets hit by the proverbial bus," as Kate put it, a bit too cheerfully. I learned how to update and program the family's six TiVos: one in each entertainment room, one in the first living room, one in the master bedroom, one in the exercise room, and one in the den. The recorded programs varied based on the viewing preferences of the family member(s) who spent the most time watching in that room. Each day a PC was supposed to test every Tivo and input any new show the family wanted recorded.

One day I learned how to prepare the guest apartments for the Hamiltons' friends and family. Kate walked me through each room in the apartments and asked me to tell her what was wrong. I started in the bathroom. The toilet was spotless, the mirrors clean, the towels had been washed. French shampoo and conditioner and an apricot body scrub were stacked next to the shower. A toothbrush and travel-size tube of toothpaste were neatly placed by the sink. I couldn't see anything wrong. Kate raised her eyebrows, like a teacher waiting for a slow pupil to grasp a problem.
"I'm just not sure."
"Take another look."
She relished these situations. The oversights, the blunders, the miscalculations. She loved correcting, scolding, humiliating. An elite cleaning service had scoured and cleaned the day before. The bathroom was literally glistening, light reflecting off the porcelain of the tub.
"Right angles," she finally said.
"The toothbrush should form a right angle with the edge of the sink. Always think right angles, anything else looks sloppy. Also, look at the towel. Notice how it's closer to the left end of the rack than the right? It should be perfectly centered. If you can't get it by sight, bring a ruler."
We went through every room in the guest apartments and in every one I missed something that Kate took great pleasure in pointing out. The curtains should have been opened to emphasize the view, the remote placed on the bedside table for easy access.

The refrigerators were stocked with hundreds of dollars of fine food. Each guest had a file with their preferences in brands and foods stored. Flowers and chocolates and opera or concert tickets were placed on the dining room table next to a standard yet plausibly personal letter from the Hamiltons that welcomed the guest and wished them a pleasant stay.

I'd expected that making six figures meant being treated with a certain respect. I'd imagined myself pacing and lecturing in a conference room, holding forth on esoteric affairs while a room of rapt listeners took diligent notes. People who made six figures were important. Important people did not spend their time aligning soap at right angles. And yet this seemed to be exactly what 40 of us were paid to do.

The other PCs I classified based on their feeling toward Kate. There were those like David Patrick who openly despised her. There were those who despised her discreetly (rolling their eyes as she walked away). And there were those who emulated her. The emulators were a small group who took their work as seriously as Kate did, arriving early and leaving late and never making any comment that would suggest the angle at which a toothbrush was placed was anything but a vitally important matter.

In the world of PCs, Robert Hamilton was God. We obeyed his commands, never questioned the justness of his decrees and saw evidence of his power and glory everywhere in the world. Kate was something like the pope: the closest a mortal could get to God. She interpreted the will of God, reminded us of our duty to serve and honor him in his infinite wisdom. David Patrick was basically Satan, at least according to Kate. He tempted the faithful, made light of his work, pointed out flaws and inconsistencies in the emails Robert sent. Kate would visibly bristle and shudder whenever David's name was mentioned. He simply refused to take his work or Robert too seriously. "Robert's a cool guy," he'd say with a casualness that infuriated Kate, "but he goes a bit crazy at times." This was pure heresy, and there was a social cost to associating with heretics. Kate warned me not to pay too close attention to what David said if I was interested in succeeding at Hamilton and Co. I told him about Kate's warning one day and he laughed and said, "Yeah, you gotta kiss some ass around here now and then."

It didn't seem to be advice he followed, but I generally did. Kate had a talent for reprimanding me only when others were present to maximize my humiliation. Whenever she began fuming and scolding I looked as contrite and sorrowful as I could, hung my head, and nodded solemnly in agreement with everything she said. This proved to be an even more effective strategy than I'd hoped. She was clearly pleased by this display of obedience and she started allowing herself little rhetorical flourishes, pacing while she spoke like a lecturing professor. She also started lecturing me more than before, often apropos of nothing. She'd slide up to my desk at the downtown office and say, "You might want to jot this down," then launch into a disquisition on the intricacies of placing a container in just the right quadrant of zone three on Robert's desk. I mentioned to David
how the notepad seemed to have modified Kate's behavior. The next day I heard him say to her, "You know, Kate, I think you should start taking notes whenever I speak." She glared at him and walked away.

Sometimes she would give little historical asides, explaining how a certain PC first devised the zoning system for the desk or some similarly illustrious achievement. She would narrate the advances made by PCs (including herself) as if relating the successive achievements of luminaries in some esoteric realm of science: first gravitation, then relativity, then string theory. The breakthroughs involved more thorough testing procedures for the family TiVos, an infallible system for responding to family phone calls, an intercom network that allowed Robert to better monitor the kids. The vocabulary many PCs used to discuss their work made it sound like it almost could be physics. There was much talk of zones, quadrants, methodology, hypotheses, data, observation, refining of results. The impressive vocabulary formed a sort of wall that protected PCs from the reality of what we did every day: pamper and obey the every whim of a very wealthy man.

The language of science was also what Robert expected. He'd studied chemistry, math and computer science at Harvard in the late 70s. In the 80s he ventured into finance and quickly developed certain mathematical techniques that minimized risk and accurately predicted minute fluctuations in financial markets. He made a fortune within a few years. He stayed involved in the details of finance and hedge funds, but he never forgot his scientific background. His capacity to partially apply the seeming certainties of science to the realm of finance made him rich and he naturally assumed that domestic happiness would result from the application of scientific methods to a huge household with a pirate-obsessed toddler.

But it seemed that the systems Robert devised to ensure regularity and safety were always being marred by human error. The latest example was the intercom system. It was installed for 20,000 dollars and let him monitor the noises from the kids' rooms. But it had an inconvenient feature that made it easy to switch the system for two-way monitoring. Not only could Robert and Susan hear every noise in the kids' rooms, but if a single dial was turned too far, the kids could hear everything from their parents' room as well. They tried taping the dial, posting printed reminders above it, entrusting a PC to check it daily, but every few weeks the dial would somehow get turned and Robert would send a furious email to Kate asking for a solution. Finally the entire system was replaced and a new one with only one setting was installed. Robert's response to this sort of human error had three parts: first, he used a recruiting system designed to find people who made the fewest mistakes. Next he paid them enough to guarantee their effort. Then he tried to minimize human involvement anyway.

On important projects he created multiple safeguards and layers of protection. Not only did the intercom system allow him to hear if Joseph cried in the night, it also relayed any noises to a set of speakers in the bedrooms of the nannies on the 12th floor, and whichever nanny was on-call would "respond to the situation." Yet because Joseph could be suffering silently, he slept connected to a series of discreet medical devices and sensors that monitored his vital signs and sent an hourly report to the email of the on-call nanny. If any vital sign dipped below a certain threshold the machine would call Robert, the nannies, and 911 on loop until someone answered.
Because the machine could fail, it was standard procedure for the on-call nanny to check on Joseph every two hours throughout the night.

Some of this I learned from case studies, the rest of it I picked up from David. We had lunch whenever I was at the downtown office, which was usually two or three times a week. It was somewhat of a mystery to me how he hadn't been fired yet. Kate despised him and she was the senior PC. But David told me that he and Robert got along well, and that for all her claims to power, Kate couldn't make any important decisions without Robert's approval. I could scarcely imagine meeting Robert, let along getting along well with him.

But David had a way of getting along with people. We went to at least a dozen restaurants within a few blocks of the downtown office and at each one the waiters greeted him like a long-lost brother. They'd bring us an extra round of sushi, a bottle of wine on the house, they'd clasp his arm and pat his back. He liked to linger over lunch. After half an hour I'd start thinking about things I should be doing at the office, but David was just getting warmed up, savoring the last of his appetizer, telling an anecdote to the waiter, ordering a carafe of hot sake. The first time we had lunch together he looked at the bill after the waiter placed it on the table. Then he looked at me.
"So what are you working on?"
"Well I've been doing"
"Great," he cut me off, "We just had a business lunch," and he put down his Hamilton & Co credit card to pay.
CHAPTER 1

I spent a few weeks in penitential solitude. No alcohol, no $600 sex. I read only philosophy, Maimonides and Aquinas, austere accounts of types and conditions of knowledge. I refrained from sexual daydreams about strangers. They suddenly seemed too... possible. After work I'd ride the subway to the ends of different lines, wander around Brooklyn, listen to people speak Russian. The days were getting shorter, colder. It was already dark by the time I left work. Little things would devastate me - a collision with a stranger on the street, just missing a train. I had visions of myself huddled in the corners of subway stations, my clothes in tatters, muttering as the faceless thousands streamed past. I stopped returning phone calls, feigned illness to avoid social situations. I walked uptown to the cloisters, watched sunlight move across medieval stones. Maybe what I needed was to learn Latin or Old English, to sink into declensions of obscure nouns. I stared at the subway ads for divorce lawyers, exterminators, toe bunion removal services, cosmetic dentistry and tried to imagine a single person who would need all of these services, a human aggregate of urban misery.

For some time I'd heard scurryings in my apartment in the night. These were substantial scurryings - something larger than roaches. I was thinking rodents, even raccoons. Something with teeth and a central nervous system. As soon as I flicked on the lights they stopped. I tracked the hub of activity to a corner of my room with an old metal radiator. At its base the floorboards had warped and curled back to form a gaping hole in the floor. I bought traps of elaborate cruelty, slamming metal contraptions, large sticky surfaces and scented lures. I lay awake late into the night, waiting to hear the slamming of steel jaws. But the traps were useless - whatever it was, it was beyond my traps. I left hunks of cheese beside the traps, great bits of stinking Swiss, but I found them gone in the mornings, the traps unsprung.

I dreamed of rat corpses, rat holocausts, rats writhing in pain. Then I saw the solution. One night I waited until I heard the scurrying. I put a kitchen plate over the hole without turning on the lights. Its only escape route was sealed. It was trapped in the room. I could've let it starve to death, but I wanted to finish what I'd started. I took a broom and raked it under the bed and a large black rat went racing towards the hole then reeled back when it saw the plate. It froze. Its whole body moved with tiny pulses of breath. I raised the broom slowly over my head, approached within striking distance and slammed it down as fast as I could. It darted back under the bed before the broom hit the floor. I went to the kitchen and found a large pot and filled it with water. I turned on a burner and waited for it to boil.

I felt happier than I had in weeks. After a few minutes I lifted the pot of boiling water with two old potholders and carried it into my room. I set the pot on the dresser, took the broom, and flushed the rat from under the bed. It raced back to the same corner by the radiator and froze. I slowly lifted the pot and climbed onto my bed. It had nowhere to go. I inched across the bed until I was close enough to pour the boiling water and shifted my grip so I could maximize the speed of the flip. I waited a moment, to let its fear dissipate. Then I flung the boiling water at the rat,
grunting out a battle cry as I hurled it. I lost my grip of the pot as I threw the water and it clattered to the ground. It hit the floor just as the rat made a hideous screeching noise. It was scalded but alive, twitching and scrabbling on its back. I took the broom and started beating it, shouting with each blow. After a few hits it stopped moving. I moved the plate aside and swept its corpse back into the hole as a warning to the other rats. I was picking up the pot when I heard a knock on my door. It was my roommate, the painter.

"Hey"
"Hey"
"Everything ok?"
"Yeah, fine."
"I heard this thud and then some kind of screaming and pounding."
"Yeah, well. Just a crazy dream."

I killed rats on the days things went badly. If Kate sent me a nasty email, I'd kill a rat. If I didn't get a seat on the subway, I'd kill a rat. I used boiling water and a broom. There were a seemingly endless number to kill. All I had to do was leave the hole open and one would come scurrying out to its death. I was a matador, the room was my ring.

Eventually it occurred to me that I might be spending too much time alone. So I decided to try NYCdates.com again. This time I’d avoid hiring a prostitute.

The first ad I liked was titled "Lonely in Brooklyn." It sounded like a bad novel or an alternative rock group who wore matching skinny jeans and sang about their emotions. It read: "I'm not going to do some routine here to try and show my winning personality or how great a fuck I am. I'm just back from six months of traveling and want someone to have coffee with. If we click, cool. If not, whatever." I liked the nonchalance and I loved the shock of the word fuck: I read it a few times and each time felt the same pleasant thrill, the word pulsing with crude hope. I toyed with a few possible replies before sending her this: "A coffee sounds nice." She wrote back two days later with a day, a time and a coffee shop in the West Village.
It was more of a summons than an invitation: 2:00, Saturday, The Gnarled Oak.
CHAPTER 19

I had no idea what she looked like or even how old she was. The coffee shop was all raw, dark wood, unfinished walnut and maple, long benches hewn from thick trunks, patches of bark still visible. The slow movement of a Schubert symphony was playing. I scanned the tables, students reading, highlighting passages, laptops and espressos everywhere. I looked for an earnest, hopeful face but saw nothing, no one waiting for someone. I narrowed down the possibilities to the three girls sitting alone at tables and began to stare questioningly at each. Two didn't notice, but after a prolonged glance the third looked up from a book, nodded at me and raised her hand as if asking a waiter for the check. She was very pretty, streaks of dyed red mingled with the black of her hair.

"Hi, Sara?"
"Yea, remind me your name."
I introduced myself.
"Okay, well, here we are."
"Yeah, good to meet you."
"Can I be honest with you?"
"Sure."
"I'm fucking tired. I just want to go home and sleep."
She ran her hands through her hair and exhaled, sending a few stray hairs shivering upwards. Her demeanor was a mix of bored and exasperated, like a kid in detention.
"I could sing a lullaby."
"Funny, ok, go good. Humor is good. Unless that was some creepy innuendo? Creepy innuendos are bad."
"Perfectly innocent, no innuendos."
"Okay, so I probably shouldn't," she repeated the hand-through hair gesture, "but can I tell you something?" She released another puff of breath that sent hairs skittering away from her face.
"Un-fucking-believable what happened. This guy, this morning, seemed normal, then after ten minutes of chit-chat he takes my hand and tells me he wants to screw my brains out."
"So this guy was who?"
"Someone from the Internet, like you. Well hopefully not. You know what it's like? It's like a big fucking net. Maybe you haul in a few decent fish, but then there's all this garbage and fucking sting rays and other shit. My friend Amanda, met her boyfriend online, that's great and all. She's the one who talked me into it. So now I'm wondering did that guy confuse me with someone else who posted some kinky ad? Or was he just a fucking prick?"
"So what did you do?"
"I told him if he didn't take his hand off mine I'd scream. Then I told him to leave."
I nodded.
"So I'll ask you about yourself in a minute, but first can I tell you something else that I probably shouldn't? I've already had coffee with six other guys today, you're number seven. And those seven were picked from 85 replies. I took the post down after two hours and got 85 replies. This fucking city has too many lonely people."
"Jesus. I'm honored."
"Don't be, it was pretty random. I'm not looking for a soul-mate or anything, and I'm not into just fucking some stranger either, I tried that once and it didn't work."
I loved the bluntness, the foul language, the periodic blowing of unruly hairs from her face.
"Well, at least you're cute. Who are you?"
I began trying to explain what I did at Hamilton & Co, stumbling under her gaze like an escaped convict caught in a floodlight. I paused, inhaled and tried another strategy.
"I'm a strategic consultant and analyst, it's pretty complicated and dry so I won't go in to details. Besides that I read a lot."
"Oh?" She looked at me, suspicious. "So you're at Hamilton & Co? I know people from high school who work there. I went to Bronx Science."
We traded names of acquaintances, luckily we didn't share any.
"Reading is good. I read when I'm not traveling."
She made these small motions, gripping her coffee mug, running her hands along the wood of the table.
"Where do you travel?"
"Everywhere."
"You travel for work?"
"Fuck work. No. I did bartending for long enough to save money, then I spent the last 7 months all over: Thailand, India, Mexico, Russia. Could we step outside?"
She motioned to a pack of cigarettes and I followed her to the street. She started smoking.
"Don't tell me I'm going to die. I know I'm going to die."
I nodded, obedient.
"What book were you reading when I came in?"
She exhaled luxuriously.
"Murakami. I've read everything he's written."
I'd only read one of his novels.
"Yeah, A Wild Sheep Chase was good. Strange but good."
She turned away from the street to face me.
"You've read him? I was starting to think you were boring. I pictured you reading, I don't know, nonfiction books about railroad construction methods."
She shivered in the cold fall air. Her coat was draped over the back of her chair inside.
I was her last appointment of the afternoon. She spent a decent bit of time dissecting the previous six encounters she'd had. She said the thought of meeting people for weeks was too grueling, so she'd crammed seven meetings into one Saturday. Every few minutes she did a little hand gesture and we went outside so she could smoke.
"I should warn you," she said, exhaling. "I'm a bitch."
"Oh?"
I sounded idiotic, as if she'd told me she collected model airplanes.
"Yeah. I'm not sweet or good-natured. I say nasty things, I smoke, I don't bake. I'm not what guys look for."
"What do guys look for?"
"You know, domestic shit. Nice blowjobs and fresh apple pie."
She tapped some ash onto the sidewalk.
"Guys want a girl who sees their strengths and ignores their problems. I'm the opposite, I see the
problems. Working at a bar hasn't given me the best impression of your gender."
We went back inside. She kept telling me how undesirable she was, how vicious and flawed, how it would be a terrible idea to date her. I wasn't sure how to take this. Was she testing me, trying to scare me off, or flirting? She was like a haunted crumbling movie-mansion with the words: Abandon hope all ye who enter here scrawled in Gothic script above the door. Either her intentions were backfiring or working perfectly; the more she warned me about the perils of dating her, the more interested I got.
"Another thing is kissing," she said. "Do you know what it's like to kiss a smoker?"
I shook my head.
"Truly disgusting. We taste like ashtrays and death. No one wants to kiss that."
I couldn't agree with her and I couldn't disagree with her. If I agreed with her there was no hope of dating her, but she phrased her remarks so that it was difficult to disagree without sounding like an idiot.
"I've heard it isn't so bad - kissing a smoker."
"I'm also possessive, jealous. I have basically two types of relationships. The first type, I don't give a shit about you. The second, you're all I think about. And not in some romantic way - it's scary, obsessive. You look at another girl and I start weeping."
"Hmm."
"And I'm self-destructive. Constantly sabotaging my own happiness, especially in relationships. I choose swaggering assholes, sociopathic narcissists, men who leave a trail of wreckage in their wake. That's what I'm attracted to. Because I'm self destructive. Is that what you are?"
Again there was really no right answer. I sort of nodded. We went outside for her to smoke. She'd smoked an astonishing number of cigarettes in such a short time.
"Another thing that sucks is my schedule. I work nights at a bar, so I couldn't see you until like 2 AM, and I'll be tired and in a foul mood after six hours or serving beer to apes in suits who want nothing more in life than to get drunk and fuck someone, generally me."
I thought of book 4 of the Odyssey, Odysseus wrestling the sea-god Proteus, clinging to him as the god shifts through shapes until he finally tires and yields his secret. Maybe the thing to do was just hold on while she tried to shake me off.
The sun was down and the air was cooling fast. She did a whole-body shiver as she smoked that seemed insanely erotic.
"It's late," she said. "We might as well eat something."
We went to a vegan place in the west village and split a huge plate of nachos and a bottle of wine. She was 24; she'd been out of school longer than I had. I asked her more about traveling and she told me anecdotes. Watching a soccer riot at a hostel in Bogota with roof access, taking a three-day train ride across Russia and almost getting robbed. She had a vast supply of anecdotes. She'd also traveled during summers while she was at Columbia. After she graduated, she'd declined a desk job at a policy think-tank in D.C. and gotten a job tending bar because it would let her travel. Her bar was close to the restaurant and she had to work after we finished dinner. I paid the bill and walked her over to the bar. We stood outside for a moment.
"Well, you can call me," she said, smiling. "But right now you're someone I don't give a shit about."
CHAPTER 20

Kate finally wanted some progress on the source of appliance murmur. She’d begun dropping hints that my days might be numbered. On days I was at the residence during the PC’s access window I would wander the apartment and listen for the murmur. I felt like I was tracking some mythical beast rumored to exist but never heard or seen. I mentioned my lack of progress to David at lunch one day. "So you're not sure what the source is?" I shook my head. "Let me ask Robert, I'll get back to you." "Ask Robert? You can just ask him that?" "Yeah. Except, wait, no, this won't work. Kate has access to his email. If I ask him, she’ll know, and if she hasn't suggested you ask him either she doesn't want you to or she's waiting for you to suggest it."
"God, ask Robert. It's so simple - I thought I should be triangulating the location by satellite or something."

Kate approved my request to ask Robert if he had noticed the source of the sound, so I spent an afternoon composing my first email to Robert. Emails to Robert had to follow a strict form: they had to identify the name of the project (appliance-generated noise), its status (incomplete), the purpose of the email (to collect information), followed by a request or recommendation. I requested any information he might have about the source, quality, and times at which the noise occurred. He wrote back within a few minutes:
"Evenings, K1, a low vibration and a faint throbbing sound."

Kate suggested I stay late that night and try to identify the source of the noise. The family would make an exception to the rule that PCs only work in the apartment when it's empty, she told me, as if this were an act of sublime charity. I wasn't sure what I would do once I'd found the source of the noise, but perhaps some solution would suggest itself. I waited in the living room on the 11th floor and watched the late afternoon light color the leaves of Central Park. The other PCs went home between 5 and 6 and I turned the apartment's lights on. The family ate dinner at 6:30. I was going to slip into the apartment at 7:30.

At around 7:00 I heard the door to the staff apartment open and close. It was Emily, the on-call nanny for the evening. She sank into the sofa in the living room and announced that she needed to take a nap. Within a few minutes a gentle, rhythmic breathing sound was coming from her slightly parted lips.

Just before 7:30 I left Emily asleep on the couch and took the elevator to the 16th floor. I slipped the key into the lock and eased the door open. The front hallway was dark. From somewhere deep in the apartment I heard the laugh-track of a sitcom. I was allowed to be there, but it felt wrong, like I was an intruder. I walked quietly through L1 to the first kitchen, K1, where Robert had
heard the noise. The kitchen was completely dark, but I didn't want to draw attention to myself by turning on any lights. I exhaled slowly and tried to focus all my mental energy on listening. A low humming noise seemed to emanate from the center of the room. Every minute or so the noise would spike in intensity, then return to a soft, steady hum. With my head cocked to the side and my eyes closed, I moved slowly toward the source of the sound. It was an incredibly faint noise. I wouldn't have heard it if I hadn't been listening for it. During the few seconds when the noise intensified I moved forward quickly, then when it subsided I resumed my slow pace. I was moving toward the refrigerator, the gleam of the stainless steel doors shining faintly in the dark.

I was standing next to the fridge when something large slammed into my back. A female voice gasped and screamed. I turned around and saw a large dark shape moving away from me. The lights flicked on and I saw the face I recognized from the framed photo in Robert's office. It was Susan. She was even larger than I expected. Her face was scrunched into a confused scowl. She stared at me for a few seconds trying to figure out who I was.

"Excuse me?"
She spoke in a high, squeaky voice.
"I'm so sorry - I'm a new PC and Kate told me to stay late tonight and try to listen for this appliance murmur that's been bothering Robert."
"What's a PC? What are you doing in my kitchen?"
"I was trying to find the source of this noise."
"You were standing in my kitchen."
"I'm sorry I..."
"I think you'd better go now."
She stood by the light switch and watched me as I crossed the room, wincing in apology, and scurried back through L1 and out the front door.

This was bad, very bad. I'd made God's wife angry. At best, I'd be flogged by Kate and immortalized as a blundering idiot in a case study. At worst, I'd be fired after less than two months. Rather than wait for the elevator I pounded down the cement stairs from the 16th floor back to the 11th. I could already hear Kate's pinched voice and see the crowsfeet around her eyes twitching as she berated me.

I'd experienced and observed enough that I could anticipate the details of the interaction, the whole ritual of self-abasement and blame and even her hint of maternal disappointment to suggest how deeply I'd failed her.

Suddenly I felt overwhelmed by the beauty and greatness of all I seemed about to lose. I would have been able to pay off in months the student loans that would have normally taken years. I would have been able to move out of my dirty, small, roach-infested apartment, to have dazzled parents and friends with generous gifts, plane tickets and rare wines and collector's edition box sets. I saw myself jetting off to Paris for the weekend with Sara, helping my parents retire early, their grateful, wrinkled faces a tacit acknowledgement of how thoroughly I'd dispelled any doubts they ever had, surpassed any hopes they'd ever harbored. I'd just begun to taste the deliciousness of wealth - the Sauvignons, the sausages.
I paused and took a deep breath.

What terrified me was the size of my salary and thus the size of its potential loss. Kate understandably confused PCs' fear of losing their jobs with a fear of her, when really she was seen as an obnoxious but ultimately amusing figure with a lust for power and delusions of grandeur. The true fear was losing a salary that someone with a humanities degree would almost certainly never make again.

It could be worse, I told myself. I could be what David called "a lifer." Lifers were older PCs, usually in their early thirties, who had assumed so many expenses - a family, a mortgage, a certain lifestyle - that it would be difficult if not impossible for them to ever leave Hamilton & Co. Not only were they doomed to an eternity of comparative research into the smoothness of different cotton shirts and the firmness of varying toothbrush bristles, they also couldn't afford not to take their work seriously. Their lives and their families literally depended on the quality of their "research" for the Hamiltions.

This and more flashed through my mind as I slammed down the stairs to the 11th floor. Perhaps Susan was composing an email already, narrating the horror of the collision, the inadequacy of my apology and explanation, demanding my immediate dismissal. I pushed open the door to the apartment and went to get a novel I'd left by my computer that I would read on the subway ride home. Flaubert's *Sentimental Education*. The sound of the door creaking open or my steps on the wooden floor of the hallway woke Emily. When I got to the living room she was doing a stretch-and-yawn movement and had the confused look of someone who hasn't quite realized they're awake. She smiled vaguely as her eyes focused on me and sighed as she sat up.

"Sorry if I woke you."
"That's okay, it's good. My 8:30 sweep is coming up, my alarm was set anyway."
I nodded. She seemed to suddenly realize it was strange for me to be at work so late.
"Are you doing a night-shift with me?"
"No, I was just here, for this project. I ran into Susan."
"Oh? No big deal, she's awkward and sounds like Minnie Mouse, or Moose, as it were. But don't worry about it, you're not paid to make small talk."
"Yeah, but see I actually ran into her, like we collided."
I made motions with my hands to show us colliding.
"Like, Boom," she said.
"Big boom."
"The two of you just, Boom," she smashed her hands together and snorted and started laughing.
"Yeah, boom, big boom."
"So what happened?"
"Well I was in the kitchen, K1, in the dark, trying to listen for this noise, and I was close, I almost found its source, right by the fridge, when she just plowed into me."
"Holy shit. Did you fall over?"
"No, just sort of staggered a bit."
"So she plows into you, you're miraculously not hurt, and then what?"
I told her the rest of the story.
"Oh shit, my friend."
"What, am I screwed?
"Are you screwed?"
"Yeah, am I screwed?"
"Well, it depends on what you mean by screwed."
"What does screwed mean to you?"
"Well screwed means either Kate tries to fuck you, or Susan/Robert try to fuck you. If they try to fuck you, you're fucked."
"I see."
"Oh shit, wait! What time was it, when you two went boom?"
"I don't know, maybe 7:45."
"You're fine, she won't say a thing. She's not supposed to be eating after dinner, which explains A. the speed at which she was moving and B. the fact that she didn't turn the lights on either and means that C. she won't say anything to Robert or Kate, because she knows she isn't supposed to be eating after dinner."
No one said anything the next morning. There was no email seething in my inbox, no public
summoning for private punishment. Just the steam of coworkers' coffee, the sounds of computer
monitors stirring from hibernation. I'd been at Hamilton & Co for over a month and done
basically nothing. I'd absorbed the details of many procedures, I knew where every electrical
outlet in the residence was and I knew where the clear plastic child-proof socket covers were
stored. I knew the zones of Robert's desk downtown and the proper arrangement of the contents
in each zone. But I hadn't really done anything. I'd made almost 6,000 dollars for purchasing
bagels, listening for appliances, memorizing the order in which cosmetic products were aligned in
B1C2, the first bathroom's second closet.

I was getting fairly unsubtle hints that it was time for me to produce a recommendation on the
appliance murmur problem. The longer I waited, the greater the expectations would be. But I
needed to wait long enough to have some sort of proposal to solve the problem. After the
collision night, I was fairly certain the noise was coming from the refrigerator. So I called a few
home appliance stores in Manhattan and asked questions in my best Serious Professional voice.
"Are you familiar with the problem of appliance murmur?"
"What?"
"Appliance murmur - are you familiar with this problem?"
"Appliance murmur. Like your dishwasher starts talking? Is that what you're telling me? Hey
Frank, this guy's dishwasher is talkin’ to him."
On the next call I tried a different approach.
"Could you tell me how many decibels of noise your softest refrigerator produces?"
"Well they all gonna make some noise, you know cause they gotta have a motor, a fan, a power
system."
"Right, but surely some models produce less noise than others?"
"Lemme get back to you, I got customers like you can't believe right now."

Every call was a dead-end. I started researching product manuals online, reading customer
reviews of different refrigerators, digging through old consumer reports. Over burgers at a bar
downtown, I asked David for advice.
"I'd get a noise-meter that detects sounds humans can't hear."
“But he’s human, right?"
He smiled.
“Then maybe try to chart dates, times, frequency, intensity over a few weeks, then look for
mufflers, silencers, different models with softer motors but comparable in every other way."

That afternoon I took my H & Co. credit card and bought over $1,000 of equipment - various
noise meters and monitors and electrical signal detection devices. The phantom noise was
spreading. At first Robert had heard it only in the kitchen. Now he was hearing it in two of the
entertainment rooms and the exercise room. Whenever he heard it he sent Kate an email listing
the location, the time of day and the intensity on a scale from 1-10. Kate would then forward me these emails, usually adding a few threats of her own exhorting me to solve the problem or else. One day he sent two emails, the next day he sent four, then seven, then 12. I started using my noise meters, wielding them like swords as I wandered through the apartment. Whenever the dial began quivering upwards I'd quicken my pace and try to close in on the source of the sound. One day I nearly collided with Susan as I rushed blindly in the direction the meter led me. I saw her just before what would have been our second collision and darted into a closet before she noticed me. When I emerged a few minutes later, the meter detected nothing.

I plotted the times and intensities of reported noises and asked a QA to search for some deep mathematical pattern that could predict when the next outburst of faint murmuring might occur. But the data were fragmentary and the pattern seemed erratic. Whenever I was allowed in the apartment the noise seemed to coyly vanish, only to emerge later in the evening and launch a sneak attack on Robert's sensitive ears. His emails were becoming more tormented. He began adding pleas and deadlines to his terse reports. Please fix. Please fix soon. Please fix as soon as possible. Please consult any relevant experts. Please propose solution by end of week.

Requests from Robert demanded serious action. So we brought in crews of audio consultants, electronic specialists, television repairmen, anything that seemed remotely relevant. They tramped about the apartment during the brief access windows and checked wires, adjusted connections, monitored signal settings. Everything seemed in order. They found no obvious problem or solution.

But the emails from Robert continued. He heard the murmur in the entertainment room next to the kitchen at 2:43 AM, 1:19 PM, 3:46 PM. I couldn't help wondering what he did in this room at 2:43 AM besides notice faint noises. One day he sent an email and requested that we leave him a noise meter so that he could more accurately monitor the duration and intensity of the noise. He wanted to increase the quantity and quality of data and then do a meta-analysis to identify trends and patterns.

Robert's involvement in the task was good news for me. It meant that I was no longer solely responsible for finding a solution, which meant that there might be a slightly better chance I wouldn't be fired in the next few weeks.
CHAPTER 22

The time I used to spend trying to write at the public library was now devoted to aligning bars of lavender-scented soap in the guest apartments. But I didn’t abandon my daydreams of literary glory. In fact the less time I spent writing the more I spent fantasizing. I pictured myself reading on stages in soft lights, crowds of adoring, sex-crazed women pushing forward for my autograph. I made weekly vows that this would be the week I'd actually start writing. I'd find a quiet spot, get a fresh notebook and the rest would be history. Future generations of biographers would describe my noble devotion and discipline. This would be the laboring in obscurity chapter of the biography. I certainly had the obscurity, but the laboring part never seemed to happen. Something always came up. A beer with a friend, a jazz club in the west 40s. There was always something else, always a renewed vow that the next week I'd really get down to work.

Most of the twenty-somethings I met described themselves as illustrious artists of various types. We were sculptors, photographers, film-makers, poets, screenwriters, novelists. Rather than doing anything, we got together and drank beer and talked about all the great things we were going to do.

Now and then conversation would drift back to the actual and someone would make the reluctant admission that she was a waiter, someone else would chime in that he was living on credit cards. But the tacit rule was to talk about the future, about all the great things we knew were going to happen to us.

Whenever someone asked what I did people got interested. It was freakish and unusual. But I found it difficult to explain to people what I did. There was the nondisclosure agreement to consider, but that wasn't the main difficulty. The main difficulty was making people believe me when I told them what I did.

"You get paid to align the soap?"
"You're trying to find the noise the appliances make?"
So I tended to let my descriptions inflate into nebulous generalities.
"I'm a consultant for a Hedge Fund, I work on a variety of projects, there's some research, some drafting of reports and proposals."
This usually produced a respectful, baffled silence. Some days I'd elaborate. Entering data about canned peaches into a spreadsheet became "crunching some pretty complex numbers and running them through these statistical models we designed." Writing an update email to Kate about a refrigerator became "drafting a report that summarizes some recent research in new technologies with investment potential."

David was one of the few coworkers whose life outside of Hamilton & Co I could imagine. I saw him in a loft in Brooklyn, sunlight and exposed brick, shelves stuffed with souvenirs from European travels. I could imagine his life because he told me about it, and he told me about it because he didn't really make a distinction between his "work self" and his "real self." Most
people at Hamilton & Co cordoned off their work self with bright yellow crime scene tape and didn't allow anything too personal to get past. They cycled through some stock questions and answers that simulated personal conversation, but they always seemed palpably relieved to turn the discussion to Robert-related topics.

When I finally did see David’s place one Saturday I found I wasn't far off. He lived in Manhattan, a loft downtown, good sun from tall windows, a charming cafe just down the block where he bought a loaf of fresh French bread everyday. He was always taking phone calls in different languages. He'd lived in Moscow and Paris after college and seemed to be dating at least one girl who spoke French and possibly another from Russia.

At first I’d thought people at work would be my friends - we'd read drafts of one another's manuscripts, trade quips over frothy mugs of amber beer after work and develop inside jokes, a private world of allusion and shorthand. Soon I realized that people didn't want friends: they wanted not to be fired. The constant fear of being fired made befriending coworkers a bad idea. It diverted energy away from work, and it's harder to blame others for your mistakes if you see them as friends. Since David had no discernible fear of being fired, he was free to befriend whomever he wanted.

It seemed that most of my friendships consisted of imagining beautiful futures or remembering beautiful pasts. We got together and remembered college, the greatness of all that free time, the built-in community, the number of girls. No one I knew seemed content with the present. One friend was going to spend a year in Bolivia at this clinic, another was thinking of quitting her teaching job and trying to compose, a third was finally going to start taking more auditions, getting out there, doing what he loved, even if it was unpaid community theater.

In college we'd gathered to imagine our lives in the city after graduation. Now we recalled the lost wonders of shady academe. Most of our fantasies had been drawn from some combination of Seinfeld and early Woody Allen. We thought we'd all meet in some little diner once a week and talk about dating, work, whatever. All romantic situations would be charming and ideal for later rehashing over pie and coffee, money would not be an issue, and the tide of urban life would wash in a predictable haul of endearing eccentrics and hilarious coincidences. We did meet in a diner once every week or so, but our anecdotes weren't exactly charming. Someone missed his girlfriend, who was now dating a banker, someone else lived in an apartment close to the sewage processing plant beneath the West Side highway, where the noise of cars and smells of shit and chemicals were tormenting him.

I'd come to New York with a set of myths drawn more from books than movies. I'd imagined the romance of coffee shop culture, long games of chess over chickory coffee, locking eyes with literate, wildly attractive women when I glanced up from a page of Proust. I thought about the romance of writing in the city, scribbling on a notepad amid the roar of a subway station, looking out the window at night and imagining the lives of people in distant lighted windows, forms framed in ambiguous silhouettes. I'd imagined myself drawing a kind of osmotic inspiration from the graffiti on subway cars, the blaring of sirens, the indifferent strangers brushing past. There was also the romance of disorder: the ruin of crumbling tenements, the shattered glass and
sagging plaster visible from the street, the rank garbage bags bulging out of the cans, exploding over the curb, resisting imprisonment like a vast network of guerrilla fighters.

Even the garbage had a romantic charm in my vision of the city.

I thought sex would reveal hidden depths of pleasure, sadness would transmute into melancholy, and writing would become a virtually effortless act of transcription once I arrived. My summer labours at the library showed that the city might take a bit of time to work its magic, so I decided to spend my time gaining experience. I'd managed to justify not writing before I was employed, and doing so once I worked at Hamilton & Co was even easier. It was infinitely more attractive to meet a friend for dinner, get drunk and flirt with people, read Flaubert, even listen to someone else complain than to sequester myself in the fragile quiet of the apartment with a pen and a blank notepad. So I pushed the task of writing into the pleasant, perpetually receding future. Every so often, someone actually did something and left for the clinic in Bolivia or started composing, and the rest of us felt obscurely chagrined. How great and all, but we felt they'd broken some implicit rule, that the thing they should have done was to continue planning and anticipating in great detail how wonderful it would be.

In the summer I'd taken long wandering walks, hoping vaguely to get lost, to stumble on some sudden epiphany. I liked to go at twilight, to watch the light turn the brownstones rose-colored, to feel the swell of commuters dissipate and scatter and watch the first window lights flick on in the deepening dark. I'd peer hungrily through the windows of stylish restaurants in the west 80s, then go uptown to a $4.00 mound of rice and beans at the corner Dominican place. Working at Hamilton & Co drained the time and energy I used to spend on meandering walks. When I noticed the city now it seemed a nuisance - the long wait for an uptown train, the cramped, sweating bodies, the metallic screeching of the brakes. Only months ago these details had been suffused with an ineffable charm, a mythology of urban wonder.

As long as my parents had paid for things I'd considered the pursuit of money too crass to interest me. I felt that an interest in poetry and the finer things should absolve me of the need to earn a living and that I should be maintained by the public purse, just as Socrates suggested to a jury of his Athenian peers before they put him to death.

My friends tended to feel that they too should be paid simply to exist, eat pastries, and trade witticisms over coffee in West Village cafes. The collective shock of learning that this wasn't going to happen led to a variety of responses. Some applied to graduate school, some applied to wealthy parents for money, some got jobs. The attitudes and habits we developed in college persisted despite their irrelevance to our new surroundings. We still stayed out till five in the morning, but instead of a late leisurely breakfast at the campus dining hall we woke early to join the other morning commuters hurtling through space in stunned silence.

We were used to thinking of ourselves as valuable. We'd spent four years being told how smart we were, we'd been listened to in classes, honored at convocations, published in campus journals. People nodded when we spoke, laughed when we joked, assured us the future would be a series of progressively greater achievements. We'd assumed the world would share our high opinion of
ourselves.

In my case, somehow, this had actually happened. I'd gotten a fantastically lucrative job based on absolutely no experience or expertise beyond my reading and the name of my college. Compared to a job making burritos for $9.00 an hour I had no right to complain. I knew I had no right to complain, no right even to feel the urge to complain. My friends would respond to any hint of complaint by telling me to buy them a house. Unless I was being whipped and tortured, I had nothing to complain about.
CHAPTER 23

It was easy to believe that I was worth 140,000 dollars. At lunch one day David told me the “confidential” information that Robert had made $370 million dollars in the last year alone. Our salaries were table scraps, spare change. He could afford to pay us ten times as much. Just that morning I'd seen a page snipped from Forbes Magazine on Robert's desk. It had a picture of his face, a brief description of Hamilton & Co's success, and the number 93 next to his head. He was the 93rd wealthiest man in America. Each of the PCs was armed with a Hamilton & Co credit card and a supply of "petty" cash. The petty cash was more than enough to pay my monthly rent, but this was a petty, trifling amount.

The first time I was sent shopping I felt a dizzy sensation as I approached the cash register. I'd loaded three grocery carts full of food. The spreadsheet that contained every item required in the emergency food stock was seven pages long. I checked off dozens of items as I placed them in the carts: organic apple sauce, organic canned peaches, pumpkin soup, rice crackers, fruit leather, ground coffee. The thought of Robert sipping freshly ground coffee and eating organic chili in some post-apocalyptic world made me smile. He'd certainly be well-fed if he survived the initial disaster.

As a disgruntled girl with bad skin scanned the hundreds of items I tried to smile nonchalantly, like this was a normal thing, just out replenishing the emergency food supply for a paranoid financier. The total climbed to $300, 400, 500. People behind me sighed, shifting impatiently. Finally she scanned the last item, a case of sparkling water imported from northern Italy. The total was $1,607.90. She looked at me as I swiped a credit card.
"Damn, you hungry or what?"
I was about to explain but realized it was pointless.
"Yeah," I said, "I'm hungry."

In a few months someone would be back, re-stocking everything that was 60 or fewer days from expiring.

The great thing about spending someone else's money was just that: it was someone else's money. I'd house-sat once for a friend of my parents who left a few hundred dollars on the kitchen table and told me to feel free to order take-out or whatever I wanted. I ordered three meals a day and tipped generously. Hamilton & Co was a hugely expanded demonstration of the same principle. Two PCs preparing a presentation on slippers for Susan bought 14 pairs, each at well over 100 dollars. In order to save Susan time, they wanted to have such a wide range of choices available at the first presentation that a second one wouldn't be necessary.

PCs were technically supposed to take cabs only for urgent matters, but this was a strong incentive to consider whatever we were doing urgent. The frequent shuttling between the household and the tower downtown cost thousands a week. David told me that in the two years
he'd worked at Hamilton & Co he'd never once been questioned about his expenses. There was a monthly charade of reconciling the charges you'd made on your business credit card. There were categories for types of spending and each purchase had to be coded by category. Fortunately there was the very useful "other" category that could be used to justify basically any type of purchase.

With his usual willingness to divulge confidential information, David told me that in a standard month the combined purchases of all PCs might run to 150,000 dollars. The natural question was: where did it all go?

At first I had no idea. They might have been burning huge piles of it for all I knew. Gradually I began to have a sense of the sheer number of expenses the Hamiltons had. The inventory maintenance system, with its target numbers and re-supply trigger points was designed to ensure they never ran out of any product, whether edible, cosmetic, domestic or otherwise. This meant that literally thousands of dollars were spent purchasing supplies that would expire before they were ever used. The same system governed the stocking of his second home in Westchester, so there went more money. Then there were the costs of toys, the maintenance of the aquarium, the cleaning service hired for the guest apartments, the fresh flowers Susan liked delivered each morning, the clothing and entertainment research projects, the cost of transportation, and of course the dozens of miscellaneous "other" costs. With Susan's slipper project, for instance, the plan was to return the pairs of slippers she rejected. But she got a cold and then wanted to make up the personal yoga session she'd missed. So the meeting was postponed repeatedly, the return policy expired, and the PCs had bought 13 extra pairs of slippers. Some times extra items were donated but more often they were placed into cavernous storage rooms in an old facility downtown.

I was sent there one afternoon to retrieve a toy keyboard that Joseph might want to play with. The nannies had to keep request logs - numbered lists of requests by the children - that were later reviewed and prioritized. The piano request was deemed actionable, so I was sent speeding in a cab to the lower West Side. The building was dark and crumbling and poorly lit. It looked easily 100 years old; the bricks faded from generations of sun and dirt, a tide of quaint bistros and wine shops and cafes lapping against its sides as if it were an ancient rock. Nothing had been digitized. I waited while an old Dickensian man with protruding eyes leafed through a large account book and found the rooms leased under Hamilton's alias Bernard. Bernard rented six rooms on three floors. He pointed me toward an old elevator with a latticed metal gate that opened and closed like an accordion. I got off on the third floor and groped down a dim corridor. A weak light from a distant window touched the pale cement of the walls. I followed the numbers next to the rooms and turned a corner and the light faded. There were no light switches in the corridor and I knew when to stop by feeling along the walls and counting how many rooms I passed. The door was cold heavy metal secured by a padlock. I felt for the key, turned it in the lock, heaved up a cross-bar up and the door swung open.

I could barely squeeze inside. There were stacks of wooden chairs, heaps of board games and puzzles, pairs of leather shoes, marble tiles, bass speakers, microphone heads, folds of plush white carpet, dozens of stuffed animals, old poster-board science projects with diagrams of
evaporation and condensation. Things were stacked haphazardly, a precarious tilt to certain
arrangements. There were dozens of paperback westerns from the 1970s or earlier, a case of
lightbulbs, a doll’s house never removed from its box. Somewhere in this or one of the other five
rooms was a three octave electronic keyboard that Joseph wanted to play. I burrowed my way
through some plastic-cased dress shirts hanging from a metal beam, around a waist-high stack of
cooking magazines from the past decade, and collided with the soft cushion of a sofa. It felt like I
was hacking through a dense rainforest of things, stray bits of sunlight piercing the overcanopy,
hordes of swarming, carnivorous ants nearby. I made my way to a washing machine and climbed
on top of it for an aerial view of the room but all I saw was another level of things: end tables,
blankets, bed rolls, foam rollers, green exercise balls, a bucket and a mop.

I was straining to see beyond the legs of an overturned chair when I leaned too far forward and
topped off the washing machine. I grabbed at a shoebox and a coat and tipped them off a set of
shelves that swayed and then crashed after me. I landed sideways on a couch, a metal coat rack
stopping the set of shelves a few inches from my face. Small clouds of dust rose from the
cushions. I had a sudden image of being trapped here, pinned down by possessions. I opened the
shoebox and found a series of old photographs. Many were of people I didn't recognize, some of
a much thinner Susan and a few of Robert in college. In one of them he sat sprawled on a sofa
beneath a psychedelic mural of a flower. His feet were propped on a glass coffee-table in front of
the couch. His jeans were tight bell bottoms, his shirt a marigold paisley and his brown hair hung
below his shoulders. His eyes were closed, his eyebrows raised, his cheeks sucked in and his lips
puckered around a large hand-rolled joint. Robert Hamilton getting high. It was a pocket-sized
Polaroid, probably not something anyone would miss. I stuck it in my pocket, not quite letting
myself think about what might be possible with the photo.

I dug through a few more boxes and then checked the other rooms. All six were teeming with
furniture, clothing, board games, an insane profusion of things. The things in each storage room
were totally unorganized, no zones or labels or categories. I liked the dark and quiet of the
building, its long cement hallways, the high windows and pale light. After the sensory overload
of Manhattan it felt almost monastic, a sanctuary of stuff. Late in the afternoon I emerged, dusty
and coughing, without a keyboard.
I called Sara a week later and got her voicemail. “I’m not here,” said a moody, sullen voice. I left a message, not expecting much. But a few days later she sent me a text message: *If you’re free at 2 tonight, you can come by the bar.* By one I was sitting at a table near the back. It was mostly empty, a half-hearted game of pool going at one table, a few older men at stools at the bar, their eyes following Sara as she moved about with a rag wiping down the long counter, rubbing red lipstick stains off glasses. Green ceiling lights cast a subaquatic glow across the bar that dissipated into darkness in its corners. I sat at a booth mostly in shadow and watched her work - stacking glasses, pouring an occasional drink, wiping down the wood of the bar. A sweaty strand of hair stuck to her forehead. Now and then she took a sip of amber beer from a glass at the back of the bar.

She didn’t notice me until almost everyone had left. She was sweeping the floor. “You’ve gotta leave,” she said without looking up, “We’re closed.” Then she looked up at me. “Oh it’s you. What do you want?” I started to stammer something. “To drink. What do you want to drink?” I followed her over to the bar and she poured me a beer. “I have to clean up a bit.” “Can I help?” “Drink your beer.” She swept down the rest of the floor, wiped the sticky wood of the tables, stacked the bottles behind the bar so their labels faced out. Once she’d finished she slipped on a red plaid shirt and did the head gesture I remembered from the first time we’d met. Outside she rummaged through a red hand-sewn cloth purse for a cigarette. It was cold and the streets were empty, the shops shuttered. She smelled like sweat and spilled beer. “So that day we met, my iPod vanished,” Sara said. “That sucks.” She looked at me. “I think someone took it.” “Who?” “Well, I met seven guys and you all seemed equally untrustworthy.” So this was why she’d asked me down to the bar? “Sorry, I didn’t take it.” She exhaled, eyeing me with a suspicious squint. “I’m disgusting.” She looked down at her body. “Girls love to say that. They walk up a flight of stairs and one hair comes loose and they say they’re disgusting.” “I say it when it’s true.” “You did more in the last 20 minutes than I do in most 8 hour days.”
“Remind me what you do?”
“I take long lunches and check my email frequently.”
“Funny. What do you actually do?”
“That’s mostly what I do.”
She took a drag on her cigarette and let this sink in. She squinted.
“And you make how much money?”
“A lot.”
“What’s a lot?”
“Over six figures.”
“And you’re OK with that?”
“I mean, yeah. It’s nice. The money.”
“It’s fucked up. Most people work hard for shit money and a few make six figures doing things that are at best useless and at worst actively destructive. I’m not sure you’re my type.”
“The job is really just short term, something I stumbled into.”
“Six figure jobs aren’t short term. Bar-tending is short term. At least it should be.”
She tossed her cigarette and stubbed it out with her heel. She looked exhausted, dark circles under her eyes.
“I’ve got four months to go,” she said.
“Until what?”
“I’ve saved enough to travel again. This isn’t my real life.”
“Where are you going?”
“Mexico or India, no tourist shit. Small towns, long bus rides, cheap hostels. You want to walk me home? You can see my place, but we’re not going to do anything.”

She lived in a second floor walk-up with three other girls she scornfully described as professionals. Her room was literally a closet. It held a single narrow mattress, a lamp, a stack of books. Clothes hung from hangers on a metal bar above the mattress. With my arms outstretched I could have touched the walls. She was sore. Everything hurt - the arches of her feet from standing so long, her back from bending to scoop ice and sleeping on a cheap mattress. Something in her left shoulder was burning, throbbing. She’d had a cold for a month. A hacking cough and runny nose. We sat on a couch in the dark living room and I listened as she complained.
“I ache everywhere. I need to sleep. Why are you still here? You don’t want to date me - trust me on this.”

She began listing her flaws again - she complained, she smoked, she saw the worst in people. I didn’t say anything. We sat in silence for a few minutes before she spoke again.
"I’m going to bed, you can let yourself out.”
I didn’t say anything. But the next night she texted me again.
CHAPTER 25

The few weeks after Robert began measuring the phantom noise were deceptively calm. I did some routine inventory stocking, took long lunches and continued to research the problem of the phantom noise. Mostly this meant wasting inordinate amounts of time on Google searches and browsing through obscure blogs about noise-meters and types of refrigeration systems, as trade magazines liked to call refrigerators. Refrigeration system was a very H & Co term; it implied both scientific precision and infallibility. A mere refrigerator could get old, but a refrigeration system suggested some gleaming triumph of progress. I mentioned to Kate that I'd been "investigating options across a variety of refrigeration systems" and she seemed placated, as close as she got to pleased.

But I was wrong to think she could be fooled so easily. Late one afternoon as the clock was inching towards five and I was busily observing the effects of wind on the last red leaves of Central Park, Kate cleared her throat just behind my chair. I visibly startled, which must have inflamed her blood-lust. She asked to see "the report," something she seemed to think I'd been working on. I knew I was supposed to solve the noise problem, but I hadn't realized a report was required, much less that it was required that very instant. She gave me a familiar look of martyred patience meant to convey that she was bravely tolerating my idiocy. Then she summoned me into her office for "further discussion."

As I followed her into her office, the other PCs broke their usual habit of looking intensely at anything but me and actually made sympathetic faces: either I'd been there long enough that they'd begun to accept me, or I was reamed out with sufficient frequency that they'd begun to pity me. Despite my bouts of leaf gazing and long lunches, I did feel I'd put some actual effort into the phantom noise problem. I'd called countless appliance stores, read dozens of blogs and manuals, even stayed late and endured a collision with the epic Susan in order to advance the noble pursuit of knowledge. I hadn't resolved the issue, or even made any substantive suggestions on possible ways to resolve the issue, but given that I wasn't sure I'd ever actually heard the noise, I thought I'd done the best I could.

But if there was one message that Kate, the case studies and the general atmosphere of H & Co conspired to convey it was that your best is not good enough and never will be. Thus the only reasonable options for PCs were superhuman effort or abject despair coupled with a constant dread of being fired. Sometimes the second blossomed into the first, but the psychic remains of that primal fear and despair were important: they were the motivation to always try harder.

Normally Kate's disappointment was the sole corrective to the invariably poor performance of PCs, but this was apparently not a normal situation.

"Robert is very disappointed," she told me, looking down at the floor as if to give me a moment of privacy with my shame. The odd thing was I did feel bad, partly because I thought the task was
unfair, but partly because I felt on some level that if Robert himself had deigned to notice me, even if only as a source of disappointment, then I must have done something conspicuously wrong and failed in some important way.

"We're pulling you off the project," she said, "we just can't afford to waste any more time."

For the next week I would toil in a purgatory of housecleaning and inventory maintenance, a murky netherworld in which mistakes were less likely and less likely to be significant.

Kate told me of my new duties in the somber tones that a clinical psychiatrist might use to tell a violent schizophrenic that soon he'll be moving to a solitary padded room lest he damage himself or others. I faced a dilemma familiar to poker players. I could go all in and abandon any real separation between my work and my private self. I'd base my sense of self-worth exclusively on my performance at work, weep softly on the train rides home after each of Kate's scoldings and admonish myself to do better next time.

The advantage of this strategy was clear: by risking more, I'd increase my incentive to do whatever was necessary to succeed. The downside was also clear: I'd be like Kate. And since failure seemed more or less inevitable anyway, I saw no point in being miserable and failing. So rather than investing myself in any of the work I did, I moved in the opposite direction, toward total and utter detachment.

Over the next week I spent serious time watching cloud formations above the East River. I invented missing items on the cleaning inventory spreadsheet so that under the pretext of running out to buy a new bottle of all-natural carpet cleaner (tested for safety by a Columbia University medical professor H & Co kept on retainer), I could wander for thirty stolen minutes through Central Park or look at a few Vermeer's in the Dutch room at the Met. These strolls through the park or museum were made infinitely more pleasurable by a simple bit of knowledge: I was making six figures while taking a walk. No one seemed to notice my absences, or if they did they never mentioned it.

Now that I'd been banished to cleaning inventory and bathroom resupplying, there wasn't much to do for most of the day. I'd straighten the rows of shampoo bottles in the 11th floor supply closet devoted to Susan's cosmetics, I'd stack and re-stack rolls of garbage bags in the cleaning closet, but still there wasn't much to do except in the brief and frantic access windows when the entire family had left the 16th floor and we could race madly through the many tasks and routines and checks the Hamiltons thought they couldn't live without. It was oddly exhausting to straighten shampoo bottles. I'd leave the office feeling drained and numb, as if I just spent the day solving difficult equations. Friends noticed my wasted gaze when we convened for drinks or pizza and when they asked about my day I'd often just bow my head, as if unable to even begin to convey the complexity and importance of the work I did. Sometimes they would venture a few questions.

"That bad?"
"Is it worth it?"
More often than not I couldn't resist embellishing a bit.
"We've just been hammered with work, all sorts of deadlines are looming."
Then I pictured them picturing me engaged in some arduous mental task, a vast chess-like maze of strategies and possibilities, the fate of the fund entirely dependent on my vast powers of cogitation. On the rare occasions when they'd inquire further as to what I was actually doing, I replied that while I would love to tell them, the work was highly confidential, thus adding a mystique of secrecy while avoiding the need to invent anything too particular.

Almost every night I'd meet friends for dinner or drinks. I never committed until the last possible minute. Friends texted and called throughout the day and I gave evasive replies. I thought that each night would be the night I'd start writing. Right until five I'd tell myself that this was it, I was taking the subway back uptown, no more excuses. But some invisible tidal pull always intervened between my resolve and the train station. I'd wind up at a dark bar downtown, eating a bacon cheeseburger and drinking dark beer. I always picked up the check.

While drinking with David one night, I pulled the Polaroid of Robert smoking pot from my pocket and slapped it down on the wood of the table. He picked it up and held it to the light, like a merchant examining a possibly counterfeit bill.
"Holy shit," he said calmly.
"What are you gonna do?"
"It'll be on the front page of the Times tomorrow morning," I said.
He just stared at me.
"Is there something I should do?"
"Things could be done."
He smiled and sipped his beer.
CHAPTER 26

I didn’t look too closely at my infatuation with Sara. I just wanted to be carried along, swept away by something. I wanted to experience a doomed love affair, to fall for someone in an irrevocable way, to feel the whole mythology of fated love. If Sara had no interest in me, it only showed more clearly the irrational power of my attraction. Thus I savored the signs of indifference - her muted body language, her apathetic stares, her smoking and complaining.

There was something halfhearted in everything she did - she never texted me to meet her at the bar without adding “You can” or “If you want,” which gave the invitation the sense of a reluctant concession, a shrug. When she first caught sight of me at the bar, there was never a flash of pleased recognition, just a sullen acknowledgement, the way a peasant farmer might look watching the sun rise on another day of drought.

I knew I was probably getting carried away, but I was already thinking of this as some epic courtship, something out of literature: my heroic devotion slowly melting the icy glaciers of her reserve, a thousand thoughtful gifts returned unopened, decades (at least weeks) of resistance before the final sweet yielding. Her indifference was part of the script I wanted us to follow. Of course I had no real way to know if she also wanted us to follow the epic-courtship-eventually-rewarded script or if she was thinking of a freakishly-persistent-suitors-fails-to-get-blatant-hints script. But each day I convinced myself more firmly that she was just hiding what was actually a burning interest in me.

For the first few weeks I was reluctant to show up at the bar without first getting one of her apathetic shrug texts. One night I got up the nerve to go down to the bar without getting a text, but I couldn’t bring myself to go inside. I paced a bit in the cold and went back home. A few nights a week I did get a text, but usually only after sending one first. She would always pour me a dark lager once she noticed me. As the crowds thinned out she would summon me outside with her head gesture and I’d stand with her as she smoked.

I started arriving at the bar around 10 or 11 and sitting for hours until she finished her shift. I liked this. It felt like a suitably epic gesture. Some nights I walked down to the bar from uptown, savoring the cold as it crept inside my coat, luxuriating in the sense that I was suffering to reach her.

I didn't need to add any self-imposed difficulties, she made it hard enough already. She rarely seemed to notice me when I came early to the bar. If she did, it was often with a kind of exasperated sigh. There were tidal surges of customers that seemed to follow some obscure pattern. Only a few people were left by 1:30 on weeknights. On weekends this was just the beginning and the bar was crowded until dawn. She worked weekends occasionally because the tips were better. One Friday afternoon I got a text: *Come tonight if you want, it’s gonna be*
fucking awful, working 10-6.

I was there by 10. I loved the possibility that she wanted me there as some kind of tacit support. The price she paid for the higher tips on weekends was a fairly constant onslaught of drunken horniness. She started ranting on her first break of the night.

“If it weren’t so disgusting it would almost be touching - the idiotic hope in their eyes, the sad delusion that I’d ever fucking touch any of them.”

On every break we went outside and I listened as she fumed and raged about the moral depravity of men. I felt a not-too-subtle suggestion that she considered me just as despicable as the rest of the men in the world, only marginally better at concealing my vileness. It was exciting to see her roused from her typical slumber of apathy, to watch the anger as it coursed through her and emerged in choppy hand gestures and categorical denunciations of my gender. It was also a bit unnerving; I felt the not-too-distant possibility that she might literally begin attacking me; I’d die a martyr for the sins of drunken men the world over. Sometimes her anger at the men she had to serve would jump its banks and flood into other areas, other tirades: the indignities suffered by the working poor, the terrors of consumer capitalism.

“You know what it is, these fucks are stuck in offices all week doing meaningless shit. They’re demeaned by their boss, by the work itself, so then Friday comes along. And they’re like criminals out on a conjugal visit, trying to cram in as much pleasure as they can before Monday morning.”

She gestured with the hand that held her cigarette like some enraged nocturnal professor. As with her attacks on men, I felt uneasy when she talked about the working poor and “the world's fucked up distribution of wealth.” Of course I knew I wasn’t doing anything useful or improving the world in any way, but I felt my awareness of this fact was redeeming, that it separated me from the others, the coarse capitalists trying with minimal subtlety to seduce Sara as she poured them drinks.

During the rushes of customers she was always doing at least three things simultaneously: pouring a drink, making change, and taking an order for another drink. Embroidering these tasks were minor ones squeezed in around the edges: scooping ice from a bucket on the floor into a metal trough beneath the bar, wiping up spills, tossing empty bottles and restocking full ones. She worked in a controlled frenzy, wiping sweat from her eyes, trying to minimize extraneous motions.

When we went outside for her to smoke on breaks she was drenched with sweat, wearing only a t-shirt in the cold night air. On a good weekend shift she could earn almost $600. She measured the money in days of travel it would allow. After necessary New York expenses the $600 would drop to $400. That would still give her a few weeks in many parts of the world, maybe 10 days after the cost of airfare. On slower nights she would only eke a few days of travel from the tips she made.

She was always in some kind of pain - her feet ached, her back was sore, her head pounding. I tried to detect an erotic subtext to her litanies of physical pain, I wanted to hear a bass of longing
beneath the melody of complaint. I wanted to make her pain vanish, or at least to give her some counterbalancing pleasure. I was infatuated with her pain, I loved hearing her talk about it - she gave luxurious groans of discomfort, made insanely sensual sounds of relief when she sat down after a shift. She gave rapturous descriptions of how good it would feel to lie down in a few hours, how good it would be take a hot shower. This was a level of pleasure that made sex appear paltry and miniscule. I just wanted to watch her lie down on a bed, to hear the deep body sigh of release as she felt a blast of hot water on her skin.

Not that I told her any of this. I just listened while she spoke, soaked up the streams of complaint. Watching her for hours gave me a lot of time to think. I sank into a kind of trance many nights, absorbing the flow of her rhythms as she moved in set patterns behind the bar, from the vodka to the orange juice to the ice trough. From the racked glasses to the beer tap to the counter.

Her response to most crude comments was either to ignore the guy or to shoot him a look that mingled scorn, pity, and embarrassment on his behalf. Occasionally a comment was sufficiently genuine or original that she gave a very slight smile. When I saw these rare slight smiles I felt a rush of hope and despair: hope because they proved it was possible to make her smile, despair because I hadn’t been the one to do so.

That Friday night around 2:30 a group of young business-types staggered into the bar. It clearly wasn’t their first bar of the night. They were hooting and shouting for no apparent reason. One of them was doing an impression of a monkey. He would bare his teeth and swing his arms and scramble in a small circle and the rest would double over laughing, pounding one another on the back. They wore tailored suits, ties loosened, shirts stained with sweat around the upper back and armpits. They’d reached the stage of drunkenness at which it seems necessary to shout everything you say and to say everything you think. Even amid the din of the crowded bar, their entrance made a sonic dent. I was sitting at a stool at a corner of the bar, the closest I’d sat to Sara yet. I saw a look of preemptive disgust flit across her face when they walked in. Four of them shouldered their way to the bar and ordered draft beers. As soon as she turned around to pour their drinks, one of them mimed an exaggerated set of licking and kissing motions at the back of her head. The others guffawed and squealed. When she set the glasses back down on the bar, the one who’d done the miming put his hand on hers and said something. All I heard clearly was the word tits.

She tried to pull her hand away from his. He tightened his grip. With her free hand, she hurled a glass of beer in his face. The dark liquid slid down his cheeks and neck, soaking his entire face. There was a brief moment of total silence, after which his friends began laughing even louder than before. She pulled her hand away from his and moved towards the back of the bar, cursing steadily. He looked shocked and offended in a babyish way, an infant denied a favorite toy. Then his face darkened and flushed, his brow furrowed and he actually snarled. I was already moving toward him, though I wasn't quite sure what I'd do when I got there. His friends were still laughing a few feet behind him, but a small circle had opened all around him, people either horrified or amused, waiting for whatever would happen next. Sara was backed as far away from the bar as possible. Then he lunged toward her. She shrieked and threw an empty glass at his head, catching the side of his forehead. The glass shattered. I saw him pause and then shake his
head rapidly as if trying to clear his mind.

I moved behind him, wrapped my arms around his chest and tried to throw him to the ground. I'd only seen this done in movies - brawls in old west saloons, whores cackling merrily from the balcony while men smashed chairs over one another's heads. Things turned out not to be quite so easy. As I tried to throw him, he elbowed me in the stomach. I gasped and let go of him and he turned around and hurled himself at me. His body seemed almost perfectly parallel to the floor for a single mid-air instant before his shoulders smashed into my chest. His weight drove me to the ground. I heard screaming, shouting and felt my head thud against someone's calves as a drink poured onto my neck. I remembered playground brawls from grade school, how they were always disappointingly realistic, too full of snot and blood to match the fantasies of violence we already expected. We wanted cartoon physics, bodies bouncing and twisting in impossible ways.

I saw his fist an instant before it smashed into my face and thought: I don't do this sort of thing. Then heat and pain surged across my cheek. I covered my head with my arms and he began hitting me in the stomach with fast, sharp blows. My body curled forward with the pain. He had me pinned to the floor and kept hitting me in the stomach, then twice more in the face before I felt his weight suddenly lift and saw a bouncer pulling him off of me.

I felt someone helping me to my feet. I could only see out of one eye; people gasped when they saw my face and backed away. The person who helped me up led me to a wooden booth and guided me onto the bench. My face was fire. I could feel my pulse in my check, the blood throbbing rhythmically beneath the bruised skin. Someone was telling me not to move, just to stay right there. It seemed to take enormous effort to sit upright, to hold my head up. My body just wanted to sink and contract, to curl in on itself. I wanted cool darkness and everything was heat and light.

I was resting my head on the crook of my arm when I felt a light tap on my shoulder. I slowly sat up and heard Sara's voice.
"Jesus. Don't let him see his face. Get me the first aid kit from behind the bar."
I turned toward her and attempted a smile. She cringed, slid into the booth next to me.
"Your face is fucked up. Was that supposed to be sweet? Getting the shit kicked out of you? The bar's got bouncers for a reason."
Her voice seemed to lack its usual edge, softened almost to the point of concern. Then again I may have been delirious.
"I don't want you ending up in the hospital because of me. I can handle things myself."
She scolded me a little more, but I thought her heart wasn't in it. Someone came back with a first aid kit and a few plastic bags filled with ice. I drifted into a fantasy about myself as a British soldier wounded in France in the Second World War, Sara as a nurse tending to the wounded in a makeshift field hospital. We'd make painful, tender love one afternoon once I partially recovered, but a few weeks later I'd die tragically, scarring her for life. She would have made a practical nurse, unfazed by blood, comfortable around open wounds. She opened the first aid kit and started wiping blood from my face with some kind of antiseptic pad. She was fast and efficient and undeterred by my grimaces of pain. In a few minutes she had my face cleaned, bandages on two cuts on my left cheek and a bag of ice pressed to my right eye.
"I work for another hour, just stay here and keep the ice on."
I loved the idea of what I'd done, but the pain made it somewhat hard to bask in the afterglow of glory. There was also the fact that I'd been thoroughly trounced. This had its own sort of romance, shades of martyrdom and so on, but I would have liked to be the conquering warrior, Achilles back from slaughtering the Trojans. Sara came by a few minutes later and set a glass of gin and cranberry juice on the table. I drank it down in a few sips and a second glass appeared. By the time she got off work I'd had four strong drinks. I could stand and walk without too much pain in my sides. We walked the four blocks to her apartment in silence, her usual ranting and raging failed her. At her door she turned to me,
"This doesn't mean anything. You're sleeping here because you're drunk and you look like a fucking monster, ok? Don't make this more than it is."
The stairs gave me some trouble, a muscle in the side of my stomach clenched and spasmed with each step. When we got inside she opened the door to her closet and pointed at the narrow mattress squeezed against the back wall.
"Lie down."
She turned on a small bedside lamp next to the mattress and a few domestic details emerged in the orange glow. A picture of a 5-year-old Sara digging in sand on a beach, a few unopened letters addressed to her, a pack of cigarettes, a pair of jeans. It was mostly mundane domestic clutter, but looking at it gave me a thrill, as if I'd been granted access to some intimate inner realm. She told me to close my eyes and when she let me open them she'd changed into plaid cotton pajama pants and a white t-shirt.
"Now keep them closed," she said, switching off the lamp and lying down beside me. The mattress was wide enough that we could barely fit without touching and every so often her forearm brushed against mine under the quilt. It was the most erotic thing I'd felt in a long time.
CHAPTER 27

She was gone when I woke in the morning. There was a note on the floor by the mattress: Just let yourself out. I really knew very little about her life, whole areas of her were closed off, darkened rooms in a mansion, the furniture shrouded under pristine white drapes. I lingered in the closet for a bit, savoring the sense of her latent in her things, then groaned my way out of the apartment and back uptown.

People were horrified when they saw me. My right eye was swollen shut and two long flat bruises ran across my cheeks like rainclouds on the horizon. When I went to the downtown office on Monday morning I got guilty curious stares on the elevator and in the hallway. Some people made heroic efforts to act like it was perfectly normal to look this way, happened all the time. "How was your weekend?"

One chirpy girl asked me in the staff kitchen.
I grinned brokenly
"Oh, you know, the usual."
The force of office etiquette didn't extend to David. He sauntered in with a baguette around 11
and made straight for my desk.
"Jesus what the hell happened to your face?"
I made a half-hearted joke about owing money to the mob, then explained in a vague way that I got into a "scuffle" at a bar. He ripped off a ragged hunk of baguette and set it next to my mouse pad.
"Eat some bread."
Kate saw me early in the afternoon and sent me home. At first I thought that she was concerned, that she wanted me to rest and get better. Maybe I'd missed some hidden depths of compassion. Then she explained that I couldn't be there because it would be unacceptable if an investor or Robert saw me. "Come back when you look human again. We can't have people see a staff member like that." So I spent the next week recovering and seeing Sara. The bouncers at the bar started calling me "the bodyguard." As in "Here comes the bodyguard," or "the bodyguard's face is lookin' better." I wasn't quite sure if I was in on the joke or if I was the joke.

Nothing had overtly changed with Sara, but I felt a subtle atmospheric shift, elusive but pervasive, a turning of seasons. Now she expected me at the bar on nights that she worked and she worked most nights. Before I'd waited for hours just to spend 15 minutes walking her home at 2 A.M. Now she would invite me upstairs some nights and we'd sit on the couch in the dark living room for a few minutes before I went home. She was always telling me not to think that anything meant anything. She invited me upstairs on the condition that I realized the invitation was meaningless and reflected no deeper interest in me. She also liked to tell me that we weren't going to do anything, or as she put it, "We're not gonna fuck."
I wanted to believe these disclaimers and injunctions were for her benefit as much as mine, that
she was trying to keep herself from something she wanted. One night on her couch she fell asleep with her head resting on my shoulder. I sat perfectly still, trying not to move any muscles, hoping she wouldn't wake up. I wasn't sure if she'd fallen asleep and then drooped onto my shoulder or if she rested her head there before she fell asleep. But this seemed like a vital distinction.

She let me take her out to restaurants but insisted that this didn't mean anything. Wherever we were, she wanted to be somewhere else. She didn't want to be in New York, she wanted to be traveling, hiking in rural Tibet. Even within New York she always wanted to be elsewhere, to move locations. So we took a lot of walks - around the village, over to the East Side, up to Hell's Kitchen. The only time she was content to be stationary was when she slept, after she'd walked or worked herself down to exhaustion.

I spent a good deal of time interpreting glances and movements. I invented a whole semantics of gesture. I felt like a believer searching the world for signs of God's existence, filtering the facts to match what I wanted to find. A faint smile made me rejoice for days. I read deep meanings into the brushing away of stray hairs, the angling of eyebrows, the proximity of our shoulders as we walked.

Some things I didn't let myself think about. I observed strict rules, mental prohibitions. The thought of sex was forbidden. Imagining it would be blasphemous, just as it was blasphemous for early Christians to try and represent the image of God. Any attempt to give form to something so unspeakably great would be a desecration. The thought of a kiss was skirting the edge of the profane.

I started getting superstitious, playing games of chance. If an old man in horn-rimmed glasses got off the train before I did, there was hope. If there were an even number of people in a cafe, all was lost. I began reading poems, the kind in which the poet claims he'll gladly suffer eternal torment for a single kiss, a single glance. I read love poems from past centuries, poems about infinite longing, distant and unattainable beloveds. Poems in which the beauty of the beloved floats free of her body and suffuses the entire world - trees and hills and rivers - everything glowing with a faint reflected radiance. I hadn't killed a rat in weeks.
CHAPTER 28

When I got back to work after a week's recovery from the bar fight I made my largest mistake yet.

Based on how long I had been at the company, I should have graduated from my probationary period. But just to emphasize my titanic inadequacy, Kate assigned one of the other PCs to check all of my restocking work for the foreseeable future.

Every day I began my work in different places. My top priority was to replenish to target numbers all of the items in each of the four primary bathrooms. I'd begin in Robert's bathroom, discarding used razors and replacing them with fresh ones. Putting a new toothbrush to the left of the marble drinking cup on the right side of the sink, throwing out all shampoo bottles that were more than half empty. Robert never used the same toothbrush or razor twice, and the discard-if-half-empty policy on shampoo meant that he went through at least a bottle a week.

Next I moved to Susan's bathroom and replaced her scented soaps, her almond-butter skin creams, guava-and-nectar shampoos. Both bathrooms were generally a mess, bathrobes and socks flung in heaps on the floor, magazines and loose papers and pens scattered in the most unlikely corners of the bathroom. But procedure dictated that there was order in the chaos. We had to preserve the exact locations of every sock, every scrap of paper, every pen, lest Robert or Susan be unable to find something exactly where they remembered putting, or hurling it. My usual tactic was to try to avoid moving anything. Many days I had to leap several feet over piles of clothes and papers to reach Robert's sink to replenish his supply of razors. If I lost my balance I risked crashing through the shower curtain into the massive porcelain tub and upsetting the papers he left perched on its corners. I did succumb to the temptation to try and read his papers several times but was always thwarted by the total illegibility of his scrawling penmanship, which functioned like an encryption device, locking away whatever immensely profitable ideas he jotted down in his vast bathroom, the primary locus of his intellectual life.

After finishing Robert and Susan’s bathrooms, I would move to Leah and Jacob’s bathrooms. Robert seemed just bizarre enough that I could almost imagine him memorizing the seemingly random locations of pens and socks in his bathroom. With Susan it was a stretch and with the kids it was blatantly ridiculous. But the same policy applied in all four bathrooms, which meant that if by opening the door to the 4-year-old Joseph’s private bathroom I inadvertently changed the position of a Lego structure, I was expected to return it to its exact location after I finished my restocking. However Joseph hurled his toys and clothes around a given room, it was our job to preserve the precise state of chaos we found.

My blunder happened one Thursday in Leah’s bathroom. We had a short access window and were rushing to finish our routines. The PC who was supposed to supervise me had gone to check the salinity of an aquarium and the expiration dates of organic Apricot yogurt cartons. I later tried
to claim that the two products I misplaced looked confusingly similar. One was a large white cylinder of ammonium cleaning wipes meant to remove intractable stains from kitchen surfaces. The other was a small white cylinder of gentle pore-cleansing pads, a preemptive strike against the prepubescent acne on Leah’s face. In my defense both cylinders contained cleaning wipes that were frilly, white and smelled of chemical lemons.

I realized what had happened as I rode the elevator back to the 11th floor: the clear image of the skin pads on the shelf of the cleaning supply closet flashed into my mind. There they were, next to the dish soap and green sponges. I tried to believe that I was foolish myself, being paranoid. But the more I thought about it the more certain I was that I’d switched the two products. My next mistake was to say nothing and hope for the best. I could’ve told Kate right then, gotten a papal dispensation to enter the apartment while family members were home, and corrected the problem. But I couldn’t bring myself to face Kate and endure the tirade that telling her would unleash.

I could slip up the next day, return the products to their proper locations and no one would be the wiser. But the next day Susan never left the apartment, so there was no access window. The day after was the same. I was starting to contemplate some rogue operation, sneaking in late at night and swapping the two canisters. I was convinced that these were my last days at H & Co. On the third day I could sense disaster as soon as I arrived at work.

Kate wasn’t in the office, but a series of emails from her was waiting in my inbox. Leah had cleaned her face with the kitchen stain-removal wipes. Her eyes became irritated, her skin began burning, and the on-call nanny traced the problem back to the large canister sitting beside her bathroom sink that said Kitchen Cleaning Wipes in bold green font. The pain diminished right away, but the nanny had notified Robert and Susan, who had their on-call doctor rush to the residence to confirm that she was fine. Robert also asked a PC to begin consulting with dermatologists to discuss possible long term effects. Kate was in a meeting with Robert to discuss how the failure had occurred. After I’d absorbed all of this from a series of emails I sat staring at the screen.

I knew that Leah would not be considered even remotely responsible for what happened. Most people might pause before swabbing their face with an ammonium-scented washcloth size pad. But the Hamiltons were not most people - they paid us so they did not have to read labels or notice warning signs. They should be able to go obliviously through their days, stepping into whatever car door was held open, eating whatever someone gave them, cleaning themselves with whatever products were placed by their sinks. My only hope was that another PC would share the blame with me. Leah was just an abstraction - a word in emails, a checkpoint on daily routines. Even if my blunder had blinded her, I would have been primarily concerned with how her blindness might affect my continued employment. The other PCs would care insofar as her blindness occasioned new protocols or research tasks.

Finally I heard the door to the staff apartment open. Kate summoned me to her office and closed the door.
"You're being rotated to the downtown office for the indefinite future."
She spoke in a soft voice.
“We can't afford any more mistakes. If something like this happens again we'll need to consider a
more drastic response."
I flashed on an image of Kate brandishing a long cracking leather whip and me pleading for
mercy. She gestured toward the door.
"That will be all."
CHAPTER 29

Working at the downtown office was hardly a punishment. For one thing, David Patrick worked there. We began having lunch together almost every day. The tasks I was given were low priority and had a low cost of failure, which meant I could not do any work for large chunks of the day and no one seemed to notice. Sometimes I’d look around the 47th floor in a state of pleasant disbelief: it seemed miraculous that so many of us were making so much money to do so little work. Of course there was the facade of work - meetings and emails, tasks and deadlines - but most of each day slipped away in coffee breaks and conversation, email-checking and daydreaming.

I spent serious time daydreaming. My two great subjects were sex and apocalypse. My sex daydreams involved me giving unbearably exquisite pleasure to beautiful (unpaid) strangers in luxurious apartments around the city. The apocalypse ones were full of ash and flame, and tended to involve me parachuting to safety from the 50th floor while Robert perished, absorbed in aligning his ballpoint pens.

I still couldn’t believe I hadn’t been fired. If I could make that large a mistake and remain employed, it might literally take maiming or wounding a family member to actually get fired. David, as usual, had an explanation for what happened.

“Robert trusts systems,” he told me as we ate spider rolls from bamboo trays one day. The waitresses at this sushi place actually wore kimonos and bowed after serving you. David would bow back, which seemed to confuse them.

“The recruiting methods are a system he helped design, so he trusts the outcomes of that system, his employees. When they make mistakes, he sees this as an aberration, a statistical anomaly. He won’t fire an anomaly, he’ll try to minimize its chance of recurring. So he sets up more systems, the probation period for new hires, the daily sweeps and routines. It’s a rational attempt to minimize the likelihood of human error. Whenever he confronts these errors he tries to design a more intricate and infallible system to prevent them.”

When we returned from lunch I found my inbox thick with unread messages. Two main things were happening and both might involve me. The first thing was preparation for a trip Robert was making to a conference in Athens. The staff would be convulsed with the planning efforts. There were diagrams of fire exits from Athenian hotels, state departments statistics on trends of international risks over the past decade. The amount of street noise at different hotels, the quality of on-site exercise facilities, the extent of wireless coverage in different neighborhoods of the city. David was the PC chosen to accompany Robert to Athens. He was one of the few staffers willing to travel with Robert: the rest found it too stressful. I'd read a few travel case studies about PCs bungling various aspects of trips - failing to prevent room service from barging in on Robert, failing to have phone numbers for backup car services handy, failing to stock the hotel room fridge with Robert's preferred selection of brands, quantities and types of snacks. He traveled with the same expectations of stability and predictability that he had in Manhattan. It
was the PC's job to somehow preserve a cocoon of order in airports, hotels and foreign capitals.

Though typically only a single PC accompanied Robert, a team of other staffers provided remote support, hovering via emails like guiding spirits. The support team sent a daily email briefing to the on-site PC with essential information. If rain were predicted in Athens, David would know to bring an umbrella. If there were a protest or march in a certain part of the city, David would be given alternate directions to the conference center. If the lunch served between conference sessions wasn't on Robert's list of approved foods, or if there was concern about the quality of certain ingredients, David would discreetly deliver an alternate lunch. I might help the support team in any number of ways - by fielding David's phone calls, providing updates on real time weather and traffic conditions in Athens or doing basically whatever else was needed. I was told to await further instructions.

The second project was revealed to only a few staffers who were instructed to discuss it with others on a "need-to-know basis." I got the background to the task in an email that used a familiar mixture of military diction and euphemism. An apartment on the 15th floor of Hamilton's building had been targeted as an acquisition priority for some time. Public records research had yielded the name of the resident, Marion, an elderly woman who'd lived there since the late 1960s. She rented the apartment for an incredibly cheap price through a rent control program that had since been discontinued. But the original lease she signed had entitled her to stay in the apartment and pay only inflation adjustments to the original rent price. Every five years her lease was reviewed and the apartment inspected. This was the small basis for action that Hamilton had. The problem was that she was a model resident - quiet, clean, paid her rent on time. There were no conduct violations that could be used to void the lease and open up a chance for Hamilton to buy it. He'd snapped up the other units on floors 11-16 throughout the 1990s, buying people out for double the value of their apartments or just waiting until units came on the market. Hers was the last apartment.

Kate asked me to create a strategy to acquire the property. She gave me a folder with relevant paperwork, minutes from past meetings of the housing agency that oversaw the leases from the discontinued program, notes from PCs who had researched Marion. She was 68, widowed. Not the most likely candidate for delinquent behaviors. Kate called me to her 50th floor office at the downtown office to discuss the task. "This is a delicate assignment," she said as I sat down "we don't want any appearance of impropriety but we do want to explore every possible avenue to get our desired outcome. We're willing to be very generous, but she's refused all of our offers. Now it's time to start considering other options."

She looked at me significantly, like I should know exactly what she meant. I had a few hunches, but wanted to see if she would be more explicit. If this were such a delicate task, I had no idea why she wanted me to handle it.

"There don't seem to be any obvious grounds for conduct complaint, but it's time we started to dig a little deeper. People aren't always what they seem."

Kate seemed to enjoy the noirish flavor of the last line. I flashed on an image of myself as a young Humphrey Bogart, a private detective, assisting beautiful young women in a poorly lit office, smoking with my feet crossed on my desk as I heard the seamy facts of the case.

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"You might want to start by gathering information, particularly through observation. Document what you observe, and pursue possible sources of potential. We'll need you back downtown during Athens, but until then you can spend time at the residence and see what you can turn up. Obviously discretion is paramount."
I nodded, exhaled a puff from my imagined cigarette.
"You might also think about her medical records. Of course those are private, but it might be useful to know if she has any conditions. It could be one more piece of the puzzle. But I'll leave the details to you."

She hadn't told me to spy on an old woman and take notes, she'd simply said I might want to gather information through observation. I wasn't snooping for dirt to try and evict someone, I was pursuing other avenues to obtain the desired outcome. And of course medical records were private, she'd said, adding a note of outrage to her voice to suggest the unthinkableness of ever violating such privacy. But the information might be useful, and she would leave the details to me. Were I not to maintain the discretion that was so "paramount," she would have absolutely no trouble claiming that I was a misguided and incompetent employee who had grossly misinterpreted an assignment.

"One last thing I should mention is that this is a very important task - it's important to the family and it's important for you in light of your past performance here."

She nodded primly and began leafing through a folder for Robert. No one had mentioned the appliance murmur in weeks. The appliances had fallen silent.
CHAPTER 30

The next night Sara asked me how work was going.
"Pretty stressful, some major projects and deadlines."
"What are you doing?"
"Working on a possible acquisition. I'd say more but it's confidential."
In the dark of the bar I couldn't quite tell if she was looking at me with respect or disgust.
My thinking about Sara had become obsessive. This was what I'd wanted, some doomed obsession, but it was still a surprise when it happened. I felt like a kid playing with matches who suddenly finds the house on fire. As a boy I used to fervently wish for an infinite stomach so that I could eat endlessly, cramming myself without ever becoming full. Now I thought incessantly about Sara without ever tiring of the thought. I thought about her the way monks think about God. I sprinkled the thought of her onto different moods and situations like some miraculous seasoning. The thought of her went especially well with loneliness. I'd think of her while riding trains late at night, hurling through the darkness in an empty car.

I was always thinking in metaphors. I made the disastrous decision to commit strings of these metaphors to paper, but fortunately was unable to bring myself to show them to her. It seemed romantically appropriate to burn them, to pace my room as the paper crinkled beneath a deep red flame, emblem of my devouring passion. Instead I shredded them on the 47th floor, fragments of my grandiose love mingling with scraps of classified data on publicly held corporations.

Instead of declaring my love in my own words I used the words of poets. One night at the bar I passed her a folded paper with a Neruda poem written on it. During a lull in work she opened the paper and read the poem, which ends with the line: "I want to do with you what the spring does with the cherry trees."
She tapped the paper with the back of her hand and looked at me.
"Cherry trees, huh? So you're saying you want to fuck?"
I should have known better than to expect her to redden and smile coyly. A few heads turned toward us along the length of the bar. She was never one to drop the volume of her voice out of embarrassment.
"I just liked the poem."
"So you don't want to be the spring? The spring fucks the cherry trees and the guy in the poem wants to fuck some girl and now you give me the poem and I'm supposed to think what, you just like cherries?"
"Well, you know…"
"I'll agree it's not a bad way to say you want to fuck someone, but let's not pretend it's not saying that."
I didn't bring her any more poems. What I brought, night after night, was myself. I was always there, drinking dark beer and staring at her pale face. My nocturnal courting left me exhausted. At first I'd gotten comments only from David ("You look like shit") but my appearance was deteriorating to the point that even casual acquaintances felt entitled to tell me that I looked like
shit. "Wow you look tired" or "We've all had those nights."

The timing was terrible, just when I thought I saw hints of progress with Sara - the occasional smiles, the more frequent invitations upstairs to her apartment - there was Kate's ultimatum: solve the 15th floor apartment problem or lose your job.
CHAPTER 31

David landed in Athens the next week. He had a day to prepare for Robert's arrival. He tested various routes from the hotel to the conference center. He put a variety of car services on standby. He configured Robert's preferred two monitor arrangement in the hotel room and tested the Internet, logging on to the H & Co server a few times to ensure access speed and quality. Every hour or so there was an emailed update from David. He had a long checklist of items to accomplish. By late afternoon New York time - after 10 PM in Athens - he'd finished the bulk of the work. "Off to a taverna for moussaka and ouzo," he wrote in an email to Kate and a dozen or so PCs.

Kate had an insatiable appetite for updates. David sent short emails from his blackberry every few minutes when Robert arrived the next day. "Robert arrived, plane on time." "Bags already en route to the hotel, tipped a cab driver to take them." Every so often he'd mock the compulsive attention to detail he was supposed to exercise. "Robert has put right foot in front of left, then reversed - repeating process smoothly." Kate was not amused. "Hardly the moment for juvenile humor," she shot back.

Everything went smoothly until David started unpacking Robert's luggage at the hotel. "Might have a problem here," he wrote.

Five minutes later:
"Not finding Robert's dress shirts in either suitcase. Can the PC(s) who packed shirts please advise?"

I felt the relief of a child whose sibling is about to get in trouble: I'd had nothing to do with packing Robert's dress shirts.
"Checking," Kate wrote.
I glanced around the 47th floor at the PCs scattered among the QAs. No one looked visibly terrified. I expected Kate to rampage down from her office on the 50th floor at any moment. But she never came. A few minutes later she wrote David:
"There seems to have been a mistake. Please suggest possible solutions ASAP."
"I quote Richard Nixon: 'Mistakes were made.' Re: solutions - I can scout stores in Athens, but even if I do find the right make/model, washing 50 times before first session tomorrow morning impossible. Only other thought: have shirts flown over tonight. Who forgot to pack these, Kate? Don't you usually oversee this?"
"I'll worry about who forgot to pack the shirts. Will advise course of action shortly."
She'd forgotten the shirts! If any of the PCs had made the mistake, Kate would have swooped in for some public humiliation.

Ten minutes later she was at my desk. She was panting, sweaty, spewing her words.
"A flight leaves JFK for Athens in two hours. You'll take eight shirts as a carry-on bag. Stop by the residence on your way to the airport. A doorman will be waiting with the bag - go straight to the ticket counter at the airport and show your ID, the ticket will already be paid for. You have
your credit card and ID?"
I nodded.
"Then you're set. You can withdraw a cash advance in any currency with the card. Pick up
clothes or whatever else you need once you get there."
I grabbed my keys and a leather satchel and started toward the elevator. Then something occurred
to me. I went back to my desk, slid open the bottom drawer, pushed back the file folders and
grabbed an envelope. Inside was the photograph of Robert smoking pot. Two hours later I was
reclining in the soft dark leather of first class, watching the Manhattan skyline grow smaller and
sipping a martini.
CHAPTER 32

I arrived at dawn Athens time. I caught a cab and sped through the periphery of the city, a blur of whitewash and cats and backyard clotheslines. We turned a corner and climbed a hill and suddenly the entire city was spread out below, the sun just lighting miles of white homes in rose-colored light and shadow.

My blackberry was jammed with new messages - the hotel address, room numbers for David and Robert, schedules for different days and deadlines for various tasks. Robert's first session at the conference began at 9:00 AM. I had two hours to deliver the shirts. We descended some hills and wove through narrow streets into the heart of the city. The roar of motor scooters was everywhere - they darted and weaved between cars stuck in traffic, they revved their engines in protest when stuck in traffic. Soon we came to a dead stop, traffic gridlocked.

"How far to the hotel?"
I asked the driver.
"Very close, very nice," he said.
"You like American music?" he asked me, the twang of country already filling the cab.
My blackberry rang.
"Hello?"
"Yasu."
It was David.
"It means hello. Actually the literal meaning is health. I've been reading up on Greece - architecture, etymology. Did you know more than 16% of English words have Greek roots? More if you trace Latin roots back to Greek."
"I'm stuck in traffic, no idea how close I am."
"Well, he's up, has had breakfast. Factoring in travel time to the conference center, I need the shirts here in twenty minutes."
"Well fuck."
"Where are you? Street signs?"
"I don't read Greek."
"Use the GPS on the blackberry - access it from the main menu."
I pulled it up, plotted a course to the hotel, paid the cab driver and got out. It was less than a mile. The streets were narrow and paved with cobblestones. None of the buildings seemed taller than three stories. Many looked abandoned, the concrete of the facades crumbling, paint flaking and peeling. I jogged through the streets, catching a glimpse of the Parthenon framed between buildings every so often.

I arrived with five minutes to spare. The hotel occupied one side of an open city square with stone benches and a fountain and rows of trees in its center. The hotel was white and imposing, faux columns running down its exterior, ornately scrolled balconies on the upper levels that looked out on the Acropolis. David was in the lobby, his legs crossed in an easy chair beneath a chandelier, a tan dress shirt partially unbuttoned.
"You're looking Mediterranean," I said.
He folded a Greek newspaper on his lap and looked up at me. He grinned.
"You glad you're here?"
"Yeah, a bit shocked, but yeah."
"Buy me a drink later - I asked Kate to send you specifically."

We took the elevator to the sixth and highest floor and unzipped the small black duffel bag I'd taken as a carry-on. Inside were eight neatly folded Tunisian cotton dress shirts, each washed hundreds of times so the fabric would feel soft and smooth on Robert's skin.
"Shit," David said, looking at the shirts.
"What?"
"They're not ironed."
"You're kidding."
"He'll expect them to be ironed."
"Should I fly back for the iron?"
"Stay here. Better yet, go tell Robert I'll be right there. It's the last room on the left."

He took off with a shirt and I walked down the hall to Robert's room. I'd never spoken to him. I'd hardly even seen him. I wasn't sure he knew who I was or that I'd flown across the Atlantic to deliver his preferred shirts. Five minutes later I was still standing there outside the door, trying to formulate some greeting when David came down the hall, the freshly ironed shirt on a wire hanger. He knocked on the door. Robert opened it. He was wearing blue cotton gym shorts and a white t-shirt.
"Oh, thank you, David."
He took the shirt, noticed me, smiled.
"Thank you," he said to me
"No problem," David said, "your car will be here in half an hour."
"Perfect - I'd better get ready then."
He closed the door.

It was such a banal exchange. I'd pictured something more climactic - Robert abusive and raging, shouting at his harried servants. But his tone was mild and polite, his manner cheerful and pleasant. Where was the Old Testament Robert from the case studies, his wrath descending on the sinful PCs with terrible righteousness? David seemed to read my mind.
"He's pleasant as long as things go well."

My room at the hotel was enormous. There was a king-size bed with a gauzy translucent canopy hung from the bedposts. I took a nap while David accompanied Robert to the conference center. We met at a taverna across the square for a late lunch a few hours later and split an assortment of appetizers - spanakopita, tyropita, tzatziki, horiatiki, saganaki.
"So now what?" I said.
"Well, you're here."
"I am here."
"And you have a credit card."
"I do."
"I'd make the most of it."
"Won't Kate want me back?"
"Fuck that. I'll tell her I need help."
"Good."
"Not that I do - do whatever you want."
"Even better."
"I was traveling with Robert in Germany once and I flew a girl I was seeing over to meet me in Salzburg. I took two weeks vacation once the trip ended, but she got there before those two weeks started and I kept expensing things after the business trip ended. So I'd make the most of it while you're here."
"You're saying I could fly a girl over here?"
"I'm saying make the most of it."
He smiled.
CHAPTER 33

I didn't need any more persuading. I'd hardly saved any of the money I'd made since starting at H & Co, but spending my own money wouldn't be necessary if I could expense everything. I texted Sara once I got back to the hotel:
"In Athens for work. Want to fly over? My treat."
It was morning in New York and she'd worked the night before. But the blackberry buzzed a minute later with a new message.
"Are you fucking kidding?"
"No."
"Of course... when should I come?"

With David's help I got a cash advance on my business credit card, found a bank and wired $1,000 to Sara's bank in the west village. The whole thing took a little over two hours.
"Money's in the bank" I texted her. "Take a cab to the airport and get the first flight you can - let me know flight number and details."

I spent the afternoon wandering the streets of Athens. I was sure that if I accumulated enough impressions, I'd reach a state of sensory surfeit and the excess would burst forth as writing. I was a hazard to myself and others. I kept colliding with people, stepping out into traffic, not noticing curbs. All my attention was fixed on trying to see the city. I wanted to inhale some essential Hellenic quality from the streets, the ruins, the pedestrians. Everything was a muse - the stray cats, the hints of domestic life in the clothes hung on balconies, the roar of motor scooters, rows of baklava behind glass pastry cases.

Near the top of a steep street I saw a ground-level apartment with shutters slightly opened. Inside a dark living room, flickering with the images of a television. A fat man in a white tank top asleep on a couch, his head flung back, reflected images washing over his face. I looked hungrily around the apartment, greedy for some scene of authentic local life, some clue to the culture. Everything I saw throbbed with meaning, I made each balcony a microcosm of the entire country, each stray cat was suffused with romantic charm. I stared up at second story balconies, stuffing myself with the sight of purple flowers flowing over the railings and dangling above the sidewalks. I went into ecstasies over stray cats drinking milk from a dish an old woman put on the sidewalk outside her apartment building.

This was just the sort of thing I daydreamed about - adrift in an ancient European city with unlimited funds, a beautiful girl about to join me.

Whenever I was particularly taken with my good fortune I liked to think of myself in the third person. To behold myself and feel pleasurably jealous. I made my life a kind of statue and strolled leisurely around it, admiring its contours from different angles.
Around dusk I was back in the neighborhood of crumbling old buildings I'd seen that morning. They were orange and yellow, pink and red, the paint faded and peeling, dark patches of concrete and stone visible beneath the surface colors. The glass of tall second story windows shattered and starred. Through one jagged opening I caught a glimpse of a gold coffered ceiling. Ornate buildings fallen into ruin, the facades with elaborately scrolled miniature balconies, lion's heads and foliage carved into the stone above shattered windows.

That night I "lost" my blackberry. Kate sent a haranguing email asking me to fly back as soon as possible. I showed it to David. He frowned and then wrote her an email saying he hadn't heard from me all afternoon and was concerned that I'd been robbed, gotten lost, or had my blackberry stolen. He told Kate he would keep trying to reach me and would keep her posted.

Sara arrived late the next afternoon. I realized it had been two days since I'd bathed or changed clothing, so before she came I took a long hot shower and bought myself a few hundred dollars of clothes at a store near the hotel. She looked happier than I'd ever seen her - the sullen bored look she always had at the bar was gone. I wanted to think I was the cause of this change. She gave me a hug outside of customs and held it for a suggestively long time. Even before we'd left the airport she was snapping pictures with a camera hung from a black strap around her neck. "This is fucking great," she kept saying.

On the cab ride back to the hotel she looked at the city and I looked at her. She'd brought only a large green backpack with support straps to clip around her stomach and chest. It had traveled thousands of miles with her, on bumpy bus rides in Kenya, pedestrian taxis in Tibet. It was stained and tattered and had been her primary companion for seven months, which was more than I could say. Her jeans were similarly battered, frayed with holes that showed delicious patches of white skin on her thighs. The jeans also seemed to have accompanied her across the world.

As we sped through the outskirts of Athens, she literally stuck her head out of the cab, provoking a burst of alarmed Greek from our driver. Not knowing any other words, I replied with the one I did know.
"Yasu (hello)."
Rapid agitated Greek.
"Yasu, Yasu!"

We made it to the hotel and Sara's face dropped.
"This is where we're staying?"
I paid the cab driver.
"Yeah, this is it."
At first I didn't get it. There weren't better hotels in Athens. But this was precisely the problem: she didn't want something so nice.
"You've gotta be kidding. They're not gonna let me past the lobby."
She did look like she'd just returned from some dusty voyage-by-camel across the desert, but the concierge just smiled as we walked across the lobby to the elevator. This was the closest she'd ever gotten to coming home with me. The tables were marvelously turned - usually I followed her home through the west village, hoping for an invitation upstairs. Now we took the elevator upstairs and I pushed open the room door and made a little ta-da noise. She surveyed the room
with the same expression with which she scanned crowds pressing towards her bar - detached, disappointed, vaguely hostile.
"I can't stay here."
I thought the problem might be sharing a bed.
"I'll sleep on the couch or the floor."
"No, it's not that - I'll sleep with you, just not here. This is seeing a country by airplane - I like to get closer to the ground if you know what I mean."
I did know what she meant, but I was busy savoring the wondrous potential in the phrase "I'll sleep with you, just not here."

She wanted something small, local, authentic. In her mind authenticity only began to exist below a certain price point. She wanted a tiny bed and breakfast, an aging Greek couple cooking the meals, snoring in the next room.
"This could be anywhere," she said looking around the room, "luxeory lacks character."
I threw the clothes I'd bought into a backpack and we headed back downstairs. I checked out at the desk and sent a text to David - "Had to go - dinner or a drink later?"

We had maybe an hour of daylight left - shadows were already swallowing bits of streets and tops of buildings - and Sara wanted to explore the city. What this meant was walking around without directions or destination, trying to get as far as possible from anything tourist-related. We passed rows of shops in the streets below the Acropolis, each stuffed with miniature trinkets, replicas, postcards. She sighed, turned, headed in the opposite direction. She looked with disdain at the lumbering Americans we passed and commented on their obesity, their idiocy. When we saw a McDonalds she cursed and turned around. She wanted something pure, unblemished, quintessentially Greek. Just after sunset we found ourselves in the neighborhoods of beautiful crumbling buildings. She loved it, the ruin, the disrepair.

"This is fucking great," she shrugged off her pack and leaned against the faded stone of a building. Sweating, her hair a tangled mess. I wanted to press her against the stone and kiss her. I started to move forward, thinking of all the movie scenes where the man just grabs and kisses, takes what he wants. I had to be bold. I moved even closer and was about to grab her waist when she raised her camera and snapped a photo.

We kept wandering long after sunset. She would hover at an intersection before choosing a street like a tracker consulting clues invisible to everyone else. She let some subtle instinct guide her through the dark streets. After an hour or so we heard music and traced it to a taverna, light and noise spilling out onto the sidewalk. Inside the taverna three men were dancing, tables pushed back to form a clear space. People clapping in rhythm, tapping on tables. We sat and ordered food by pointing at things on other tables. The waiter spoke no English, which seemed an enormous relief to Sara. I made a drinking motion and he smiled, placing a hand on my shoulder. A few minutes later he returned with a bottle of wine and made smacking noises with his lips to convey how succulent the wine was. The dancing continued as we ate dinner. We ate fried cheese and grape leaves stuffed with rice. We drank mellow red wine.

The dancers were portly, hairy, middle-aged men. One looked intensely serious. He frowned as
he moved through repeated series of dips and turns. His solemnity was a source of great delight to one table - older women would point at him and laugh. Sara watched the scene and I watched her.

After dinner we searched for a place to sleep. We passed many hotels but she rejected each, even small and unobtrusive ones without a tourist in sight. She wanted to keep looking, convinced that around the next turn we'd stumble on a hotel that perfectly met her idea of authenticity. The real thing was out there somewhere, we just had to keep looking. Around midnight I started to feel annoyed, something I'd never felt around her. The effect of the red wine was dissipating, my feet were sore and starting to blister and we were wandering down street after street, seeking something unknown. I quickly banished the feeling of annoyance, chasing it from my mind like a priest shooing a pigeon from a cathedral. I focused on her questing profile in the street lights, on patches of white thigh visible through her hopeless jeans.

She walked a stride or two ahead of me and I got the sense that if I stopped following her it might take her a few hours of wandering before she noticed my absence. But whenever I was starting to feel irrelevant, she turned and gave me a slight smile and I was ready to follow her through endless streets for the rest of the night.

We finally found a hotel in a distant neighborhood. I'd reached a saturation point and was no longer paying much attention to our surroundings. But she still had the same ravenous quality in her eyes that I'd noticed as she stared out the cab window that afternoon. Like she wanted to eat the city. There was a plump elderly woman dozing at a desk in a narrow hallway just visible from the street. She stirred and opened her eyes and we gestured our way through an exchange of thirty Euros for a room key. The woman pointed to a narrow wooden spiral staircase. I followed Sara two flights up to a dark hallway. Our room had a single narrow bed with a rough yellow quilt and an old deflated pillow. The walls were plastered with cracking and sagging green wallpaper, dirt visible on the exposed dark wood floor. This was the kind of place she wanted. We started getting ready for bed, the fact of the small single bed like a tree fallen across the road of the near future.

I savored the sense of domestic ritual, the unpacking of toothbrushes, the sound of gargled water, her clothes placed on a dresser beside the bed. I was sitting on the bed in jeans and a t-shirt, my eyes following her around the room the way a loyal dog watches its master, when she veered toward me, bent down, and kissed my cheek. "Go to sleep," she said, reaching to turn off the light. She climbed in bed next to me. I felt the skin of her legs brush mine, felt her hair on my shoulders. I was sure we'd be making out in a few minutes. The bed was so small it seemed inevitable. I shifted onto my side and reached a stealthy hand toward her hips. When it was about to touch her she rolled away from me suddenly, knocking my hand out of the way. "Sorry." she mumbled. A few minutes later I heard the rhythmic breathing of her sleep.
CHAPTER 34

We spent the next morning at the Acropolis. At regular intervals language-based groups of tourists flowed up the hill. The French, the Koreans, the Germans, the Russians. We fled the acoustic radius of the tour guides' voices, seeking quiet points of vantage. I felt I should be having an epiphany of some sort, some colossal realization prompted by the architecture. I was appalled by my distractibility, how easily my mind slipped into trivial matters - what we would have for lunch, the meaning of Sara's kiss, how far one could spit from the Acropolis. My thoughts were unruly schoolchildren. I rapped their knuckles, slammed my fists on their desks. I wanted to be worthy of the occasion, to summon some monumental response. I recalled words from an art history course and started applying them at random to the Parthenon. Entasis and pediment, triglyph and metope, frieze and cornice. I mumbled a litany of terms, trying to name my way into understanding.

I wanted some archetypal experience, but things kept disintegrating into details. A smiling German couple in plaid shorts posing for a picture. An obese Australian fanning herself with a newspaper. I kept circling the Parthenon, trying to find a clear line of sight. I wanted to feel ancient auras, Athena brushing past my cheek, strains of Sophocles echoing from the theater of Dionysus carved into the slope of the hill.

We walked around the temple for hours, outlasting wave after wave of tourists, scornful of their fleeting presence, trying to persuade ourselves we weren't like other spectators. Eventually we tired, our eyes crammed with geometric images, abductions of mortals carved in marble, caryatids. We drifted down the slope and found a taverna for lunch. Neither of us spoke much, some hush from the temple persisting over red wine and salad.

That afternoon we found a sprawling open-air market. Wares spread on blankets, stacked in booths, piled on rickety tables. Posters of Greek pop-stars from the 1970s next to used toaster ovens, hair curlers beside dumbbells securing stacks of old paperbacks, yellowing editions of Cavafy and Homer. The market oozed on for street after street, the roads closed to traffic, temporarily taken over by hundreds of vendors. Sara combed through the stalls, pushing against old women, haggling over scarves, handling the beads and books. Touching things just to feel their heft, passing an item from hand to hand as if making some tactile gauge of its worth. The wind kept blowing green tarps off stalls, flipping the pages of old magazines, disordering the hair of grandmothers. Sara was happy to browse and rummage for hours, the cries of hawkers and vendors turning her head and eliciting a faint smile when it was clear the vendor was interested not in her buying some trinket but in her. She stayed a few steps ahead of me as we walked through the market. Whenever I tried to catch her, I'd bump into someone or she'd notice something and swerve off to look at it.

Having watched her for so many nights at the bar, I was used to seeing men look at her. Undress her in their minds. I'd responded by refusing to let myself do the same thing. I wanted my desire
to be original. Everyone stared at her body; I tried to focus on subtle, unexpected things. The lobe of an ear translucent in sunlight, the angle of her thumb and forefinger as she held a cigarette. I tried to notice things other people missed, the way scholars of already famous paintings fasten their attention on obscure corners of the canvas and find some sudden depth of meaning in a usually overlooked figure, a boy playing with a ball.

Late in the afternoon we made it to the national museum. The galleries were emptying out. We moved against the flow of people and found ourselves in nearly deserted galleries of 4th century amphorae, 7th century oinochoes. I was more interested in the names than the things they described. I devoured the names. Skyphoes, lekythoes, oinochoe, crateros. I was also interested in Sara - my eyes kept wandering from the glass display cases to her body, bent slightly forward as she read the text beneath a hydra or amphora. I took the same habit of seeing, the museum gaze, and turned it on her. I noted symmetries and style, speculated on origin and period, material of composition and influences. I found a 2nd century marble statue of the three graces - thalia, aglaia, and euphrosyne - their white marble arms intertwined, hips slouched at seductive angles, eyes straying into the middle distance. I glanced from the statue of Thalia to Sara and the two images briefly twinned and mingled, Sara's skin smoothing into white marble, her hair frozen into artful disarray, her green sweatshirt morphed into a himation draped over an arm.

I knew I should be looking at the collection, but my eyes kept drifting back to her, placing her on the sides of vases, the painted bellies of jugs. I saw her painted in black figure on the side of a red clay wine vessel. She mingled with the garlanded parthenai shaking thyrsi, morphed into Europa, petrified on the back of Zeus-as-sidonian-bull. I stood beside her, gazing at a small statue of a satyr, focusing all my perceptual energy on the delicious brushing of our forearms, the heat of her body next to mine.

Soon the guards motioned us out of the empty galleries and we stepped outside into a cloudy dusk. We'd only walked a few blocks when an instant downpour hit. Streams of dirty water started shooting down the gutters. We were drenched completely. Usually she would have cursed and complained, taking the weather as yet another insult hurled at her, but she became weirdly giddy with the rain, letting it wash over her, abandoning herself to water. We walked back to our hotel, her sense of direction guiding us, and she was once more repeating her refrain from the day before: "This is fucking awesome." Once we got back to our room, she began peeling off layers of wet clothing. Sweatshirt. Tee shirt. Bra. Jeans. Socks. Underwear. She was totally naked. I hadn't moved. I was transfixed, wet clothes clinging to my skin. She moved forward, pressed against me and kissed me for a long minute. When she pulled away I began ripping off my wet clothes as fast as I could. My shirt got stuck on my head and by the time I pulled it off I saw that she was already slipping into a dry change of clothes.

She seemed nothing like any girl I'd ever known - probably because I didn't know her. I'd spent hours watching her, but this was the primary basis of my knowledge. Whenever we talked she avoided saying anything about her past. Most girls I'd dated wanted to talk almost exclusively about the past: childhoods, ex-boyfriends, family, the usual subjects. She never said anything about these topics. She gave monosyllabic replies or changed the subject if they came up. The only exception she made was in talking about her past travels. Otherwise her topics were in the
present. When is my shift over, I need a cigarette, what the fuck was he staring at. Or they were
in the future. Trips to rural regions of Turkey, historic mountains to climb in Lebanon. She was
all the trips she had yet to take.

I couldn't quite tell what I wanted from her. I'd thought this was it: whole days together, food and
yawns and sweat. But time had no effect on distance, the elsewhere quality she retained
whatever we were doing. I didn't seem to be getting any closer to the intimate inner realm, the
true self I was sure she'd show me if I just persisted long enough.

I wanted devouring intimacy, unhealthy intimacy. A shared insanity, the other person made the
total world. But she kept looking beyond me, staring at the city. It felt like a scene from the
movies. The hapless man waiting on a bench who sees a girl approaching, radiant, her eyes
bright, a smile promising erotic delights. He stands to greet her, welcome her into his waiting
arms, but she goes rushing past him to embrace the large, handsome man that he failed to notice
standing just behind the bench. There was no other man, there was another city. She was rushing
into the arms of Athens.

I'd never before thought of a pastry as an erotic rival. But after dinner that night we stopped at a
small bakery, rows of sweet things behind glass, pointing the only way to order. She got some
 crumbling, flaking confection, a miracle of butter and honey. And the noise she made as she took a
bite made me insane. A slow moan of delight. I wanted to take her back to the hotel right then.

But I couldn't compete with the sinuous drift of side streets, the clamour of open-air markets, the
crumbling stone of 19th century facades. I was finite, predictable in my interest in her. I wanted
to convey the epic sweep of my vision of her, make her share my expansive sense of her, make
her depend on it. But she wanted to see the city, not a poetic image of herself. I would have been
happy to spend whole days in bed at the hotel, tussling through the afternoons, the city a vague
presence beyond the windows, more part of the set than the drama.

But her appetite for wandering was insatiable. The more obscure the neighborhood the better.
The next day we spent hours on foot, drifting through distant suburbs, the textures of the houses
shifting imperceptibly. She was a collector of stray impressions, suspicious of monuments. I
wanted to have another look at the Parthenon, see the old agora. She wasn't interested. It was
impossible to see them. They'd been seen too much already. You couldn't see through centuries
of fame, you had to see the things other people didn't. This was her attitude, minimally
articulated, maximally expressed. So I followed her through distant streets, watched boys play
soccer in a narrow gravel alley, the ball ricocheting off dumpsters, startling stray cats onto
window sills.

I paid for everything. Cabs, pastries, museum tickets. I liked feeling gallant and I liked spending
H & Co money. I liked knowing Robert was somewhere in the city in a leather chair in a paneled
conference room, looking at data on emerging markets in southern Europe while I was watching
Sara walk down a street, taking bites of a lamb gyro.

I kept imagining the trip endlessly expanded. The two of us slumming around the Peloponnese,
screwing in dirty hostels, scrambling about sun-blasted ruins. If we traveled together for long enough, I felt sure the force of landscape would overwhelm us and we would be transformed together, two spectators of a single great event.

I was always taking mental snapshots of Sara, making photo albums in my head. Sara sleepy in a long t-shirt, toothbrush in one hand, framed by light in the bathroom door. Sara on the street, rounding a corner, head tilted forward, a questing pose. Eating baklava. Smoking outside the ornate facade of a Greek orthodox church, the pleasure of profanity in her slight smile. I strung the images together in a flickering flow, played it on loop.

Late in the afternoon we stopped by David's hotel. I'd been ignoring dozens of emails and texts. I switched the blackberry off and pretended it wasn't there. Kate was under the impression I'd lost the blackberry and myself in Athens. The longer I waited before resuming contact the more elaborate my explanation would need to be. At a certain point the question of evidence would arise. Why hadn't I just taken a cab to the hotel if I were lost? I wanted to consult with David and get a shared story. Something plausible that could allow me a few more days. I found him on the balcony of his hotel room, a glass of scotch with ice in his hand. He had already thought of my alibi.

"You got sick. Ate the wrong thing, could happen to anybody. You didn't check in to a hospital of course, since that would involve records, bills etc. But you were too sick to travel and spent days hugging the toilet. The loss of the blackberry was unrelated."
"Not bad."
"Let's hope not, that's what I told Kate. So lose the blackberry before you go back and don't use it in the meantime. You want to get dinner?"

We met Sara in the lobby and walked to a taverna east of the Acropolis. David's presence seemed to give us something important after the days spent only with each other - a kind of proof we existed. He talked about Athens, myths and history, Theseus and Aegisthus, Orestes on the Areopagus at the end of Aeschylus' Oresteia. I had no idea when or how he absorbed this information. He just said he'd been reading. He was always performing these minor feats of knowledge, surprising you with a history of some neighborhood in Brooklyn, an intricate explanation of how courts worked in ancient Athens. Sara seemed to hover somewhere between skeptical interest and boredom when he spoke.

"So you work for the rich freak too?" She asked at one point.
"I do. I see you've heard a bit about our peculiar employer."
"I've heard he's a fucking freak."
"Well yes, that's why we're here. Because he is a freak. A freak with a massive net worth. But this trip has had moments that were almost poignant. You should see the man walk down a crowded street. He's used to exquisitely controlled environments, temperatures always in the same two degree range, the same raspberry smoothie for breakfast every day, the same cotton shirts on his body."
"Tunisian cotton" I said.
"You put him in the middle of a teeming foreign city and he's overwhelmed. He won't leave the
hotel room after the conference sessions each day. He loses sight of me on the street and he panics."
"Sounds fucked up."
"He's unexpected. He's not the typical image of Wall Street - the gambler, the risk-taker. He's wealthy because he's cautious, not because he's daring. Now you still have the problem of extravagance. You add up the salaries and spending of his staff and he is blowing at least a million a month just to live. Even this is unexpected - the extravagance is calculated, ordered. There's no impulsiveness, no splurging. He's austere in the most lavish possible way."
"So what is he doing here?" she asked, chewing a bit of cucumber.
"Broadly speaking, H & Co is considering opening a branch in Athens or Madrid. Something opened in Salzburg a few years back, but he wants to look into southern Europe. He's meeting with potential investors, learning about markets here."
"And what are you doing here?"
"I print out his daily schedule. I print the names and photos of people he is going to meet. I place this in a folder in a particular pouch of his briefcase. I order car services. I do laundry. I test the Internet connection in his room. I pack the 12 organic baby carrots he likes with his lunch each day."
She turned to me,
"So then what are you doing here?"
"I brought him a shirt."
"A shirt."
"Yeah, someone on staff forgot to pack his dress shirts, so they had me fly them over."
"He couldn't just get a shirt here?"
"He's got this kind of cotton he likes."
CHAPTER 35

Sara had to be back in two days. She could only take so much time off without risking losing her job at the bar. I was also starting to think I was risking losing my job. David's story wouldn't hold up if Kate applied a bit of pressure to it. I'd been using the H & Co credit card all over Athens on the days I was supposedly sick. If Kate looked at the statement on the bill she could see the names of vendors and the dates and times of transactions. After dinner that night I showed Sara the photo of Robert smoking pot. We were back at the hotel, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Should I know what this is?"
"No, and I probably shouldn't tell you."
I paused for dramatic effect.
"It's Hamilton - my boss."
"Yeah? So what? He smoked pot."
"Things could be done with this."
"Like what?"

She talked me into it while perched on the edge of our hotel bed in a tanktop that kept slipping off her shoulders. She got more and more excited and began conjuring various scenarios in which Hamilton would pay us enough that she could travel for years. This wasn't blackmail, she said, this was taking what we deserved.

The next day we were waiting on a stone bench in the square outside Hamilton's hotel. It was five minutes before noon. I'd checked and found an email listing Robert's schedule for that day. The slot between noon and two was slated for sightseeing. Sara wore a pair of dark sunglasses and her usual destroyed jeans. On the back of the Polaroid Sara had written down an email account.

At 12:02 Robert and David walked across the hotel lobby and into the square. I'd never seen Robert in public before. He looked directly in front of him as he walked and he walked quickly, as if pursued. David had to trot every few steps to keep up with him.

We rose from the bench together and trailed after them. We'd sent David an email that morning. When he saw Sara he was going to lean down and tie his shoe.

They were half a block ahead of us. I was wearing a pair of shades we'd bought at a corner store. But Robert's gaze was so singularly focused that I could have been walking right beside him and he wouldn't have noticed. At an intersection they paused and Robert raised his hands and pressed them against his ears to shut out the noise of the traffic. We followed them across the street. Robert was getting stares from people. The fixed gaze, the erect posture, the rapid pace were enough to turn heads. He was a spectacle. When he pressed his hands over his ears he resembled a massive toddler having a fit.
Sara crossed to the opposite side of the street and surged ahead of him, jogging and weaving between pedestrians. I stayed about 20 feet behind. When she was almost 100 feet ahead of them she darted back across the street and started walking back toward us. I couldn't believe this was happening. We were like some badly trained team of assassins trying to execute a hit. Any second David would see her and lean down to tie his shoe. She was closing in. Fifty feet. Thirty feet.

I heard David say, "One second," and lean down to tie his shoe.

I walked a few feet closer so I could hear the exchange. Sara came right up to Robert and touched him on the arm. He flinched and cringed. He was looking toward her, but seemed reluctant to make eye contact. She stuck out the photo.
"I think this might interest you."
"No. I don't have any money."
He thought she was a vendor...
"Do you know who this is?"
She raised the photo and nearly shoved it into his face. He looked at it for a second. I waited for some shock of recognition.
"I don't know. It's no one I recognize."
He turned away and looked back at David as he finished tying his shoe.
"Let me know if you change your mind."
She pushed the photo into his hand and walked away.

We heard from David late that afternoon. He'd slipped away while Robert had an early dinner. "You're not gonna believe this," he said.
I thought he'd say something about how Robert was willing to pay millions to have the picture destroyed.
"He literally didn't recognize himself. That wasn't a bluff. I saw him look at the photo later and there was nothing. He tossed it in a trashcan. Maybe he's got prosopagnosia."
"You're kidding?"
But he wasn't. That was the end of our dream of instant wealth.

But I kept scheming about ways to expand the trip. I could withdraw $10,000 in cash using my H & Co card and we could see how long it would last. We could live cheap, eat spaghetti, go to parts of the world where you could live on $5 a day. I saw us in a hut by the sea. I'd write during the mornings, she'd teach the local children, we'd meet in afternoons for a drink on a balcony overlooking the town square. I saw us on an obscure Greek island befriending the owners of a local tavern, doing our laundry in the sea. Maybe I could become a fisherman once the money ran out, venturing out in some rickety vessel with old nets while Sara stood framed in the window of our hut, muttering some ancient plea that I return alive. Once or twice I came close to suggesting the idea to Sara, but I never did. It seemed too possible that she might say yes, that she'd talk me into actually doing something outlandish. I loved the idea of travel, but on our last two days I started having heretical feelings of boredom. I didn't feel sufficiently transformed. I wanted revelations and epiphanies, signs and wonders. Instead there was traffic and tourists. The real city was always elsewhere, elusive, just beyond our apprehension. Sara spent most of the last two
days photographing things. She took hundreds of photos. Monuments were boring, conventional. So were pictures of her or me. She wanted the unobserved moment - a plump Greek child dozing in his stroller in a city square. She was never satisfied with the photos. She always wanted something else.

We flew back on a Thursday. We were morose, quiet, hungover. It felt like a bleary Monday morning, our commute via plane instead of train. I was inordinately pleased by little signs of intimacy. The way she just reached out and grabbed the water bottle I was holding and took a sip. The way she rested her head on my shoulder while she dozed on the plane. I wanted us to finish each other's water, finish each other's sentences, our lives smearing together, thoughts and things. Even when she was right beside me, waiting in a customs line or eating a sandwich, I still fantasized about her, the images spinning endlessly. I kept picturing us in various primitive dwellings. Huts and shacks, thatched rooves or corrugated tin.

Somewhere over the Atlantic she turned to me. "That was nice. It was sort of like foreplay, being there for just four days. You get to nibble a little, taste and feel some things. But it's not quite satisfying. It'd be nice to actually fuck some time."

She smiled, heads of older men turned. "Yeah," I said, "Whenever is good for you."
CHAPTER 36

Kate was even more casual about receipts than I'd hoped. In a moment of panic I'd tallied up my spending on the trip - my flight, Sara's flight, new clothes, two hotel rooms for five nights, food and wine. It all added up to over $10,000. Roughly half of the spending was authorized, the rest I'd have some trouble explaining. Particularly the lavish meals I'd charged on the days I was sick clutching the toilet. As I had so many times before, I saw myself being fired, denounced by Kate and escorted from the building in handcuffs. But my spending wasn't mentioned when I returned. I was rebuked for placing pens in the wrong zone of Robert's desk but I could spend an unauthorized $5,000 and nobody seemed to notice.

Just after I returned from Athens, I learned that the problem of the phantom noise in the Hamilton's apartment had been solved. I was ready to admire something complex and subtle, but the solution was simple: the fan on the back of the refrigerator was broken and had been making soft humming and whirring noises periodically. When someone checked back through Robert's emails, they noticed that all of the emails reported noises in the kitchen or in the entertainment and exercise rooms with air vents that backed up on the kitchen just above the refrigerator. The true test would be whether Robert heard anything over the next few months, but after a new belt was installed the case was tentatively declared closed. The staffer who figured this out was Daryl. He had no college degree and came to work in stained overalls. He was a sort of universal handyman, deployed to fix a baffling array of mechanical problems. He did electrical, plumbing, carpentry. He'd spent 20 years as a general contractor at a construction company before he had a job at the residence. He was so good that Kate kept him on staff at double his former salary to fix basically any physical problem. He knew the relative durability of various models of parts of toilets. He knew how to route the electrical wiring of the apartment so it met the prodigious energy demands of the family but also minimized the risk of fire. He'd solved the phantom noise problem in an afternoon.

Most PCs treated him with genial condescension. He told no anecdotes about Harvard, he wore overalls and he packed his lunch in a Tupperware container, the same egg and cheese sandwich every day. He seemed to think of himself as unequal to the great minds of H & Co.

"You guys got the BMWs for brains," I once heard him say in his Brooklyn accent, "but I just got an old pick-up truck here," he tapped his forehead. He was one of the only people on staff without some festering ambition - no novel, no documentary, no tome on art history. On weekends he helped his sons run Daryl's Garage, an auto repair shop in Brooklyn.

I would have felt embarrassed if one of the PCs had solved the noise task, but I didn't think of Daryl as competition. He hadn't read European literature, and a good percentage of his remarks were automotive metaphors - it hadn't occurred to me that he could be smart. He was handy and competent, but I and most of the other PCs thought of him with an affectionate disdain. We thought we were the BMWs.
My top priority was finding grounds to acquire the property on the 15th floor. My plan was to get inside the apartment and find or cause some material damage. I described the strategy to David over lunch downtown a few days after his return from Athens.

"So say you get inside by pretending to fall over in the hall, and you are hiding what, a hammer, and you're just going to start discreetly smashing the walls while she is looking the other way?" It did sound a bit precarious, but I couldn't think of another way. I needed to come up with something to keep the job. I needed the job so that I could keep traveling with Sara - I was already fantasizing about another trip. He had a better idea.

The next morning David was at the residence by 10 AM. He was dressed in a disguise - his idea of what a New York City building inspector would look like. His hair was slicked to the side in a comb-over, and he'd found a stained grey dress shirt and grey slacks. He had a clipboard with papers and an attached metal chain from which a pen dangled. He was entirely nonchalant. "So you're just going to do it?" I asked in the elevator.

"Don't fret your pretty head," he said in a thick Bronx accent.

I walked to the adjoining apartment on 15 and hovered by the door so that I could hear the exchange. He rapped on her door, three insolent bangs. Almost a minute passed before it creaked open.

"Hello, uh, Ms. Marion Jones? Hello dear." He was doing the accent, he pronounced dear like de-ah.

"I'm inspector Patrick with the housing department. Just here to ask you a few questions and do an inspection. May I come in?"

I saw him hold up some sort of ID card. I heard her voice but couldn't make out the words. He was speaking too loudly, as if she were deaf, and chomping on a piece of gum.

"It's just a routine inspection Ms. Jones. Your lease is up for review this year so the city sends an agent to do an inspection."

He disappeared into the apartment. Maybe 20 minutes later I heard the door open. He handed her a card.

"Now just call the office if you have any questions."

I met him at a coffee shop a block away.

"So what happened?

He ordered a coffee, sipped it, savoring my curiosity.

"I don't know why more people don't prey on the gullibility of senior citizens - it's so easy."

"So what happened?

"So I walked around with a clipboard for a good 15 minutes, making notes, frowning, moving through every room. I wanted to give her time to get nervous before I said anything. Then I asked questions. 'Did you know these light fixtures are in violation of fire safety regs?' 'Were you aware of the water damage to the kitchen and bathroom floors?' 'When did you last have the walls repainted?' 'Did you know you were supposed to make an annual report listing any damages?' 'Have you kept up with energy compliance?' I took notes whenever she spoke."

He put a white business card on the table. Robert Patrick, Department of Housing. The number
below the name was my cell phone.
"There's a place downtown that does business cards over night. I took a template with the same fonts and colors city government uses. So once she got scared, I was sympathetic. Like I was gonna go off record and help her out. 'Mrs. Jones,' he said, doing the accent 'you've got a very valuable apartment here. But the department isn't going to be happy with this report. Between you and me, five years ago they wouldn't have even sent someone to do a report but the mayor is breathing all kinds of fire down our backs, wants to revamp the whole system. Can I give you some advice Mrs. Jones? My mudda, she's about your age. You was my mudda, know what I'd say? Don't wait for housing to force you out of this apartment. Find someone who will pay you to surrender the lease. They don't know you are about to be kicked out and I'm sure someone will be happy to give you a nice price to walk the contract.' I left her the card, told her to call my office if she had any questions." I watched him sip his coffee.
"It's not even noon and you've already committed, I don't even know what - fraud, impersonation?"
He smiled.
"You're welcome."
"So what happens if she calls the housing department and figures out this was all a scam? Is there even such a department? Do they do this sort of thing?"
"She has no reason to doubt this - I gave her my card, she'll call that number. One concern would be if she hired a lawyer, but I asked her if she wanted me to send relevant paperwork directly to the office of her attorney and she said that wouldn't be necessary. We're clear on the legal front. Worse case scenario, she figures out I don't work there, takes my alias to the police, they do nothing about it."
CHAPTER 37

Three days later she called. Mid-morning. I was at my desk at the downtown office.
"Hello?"
I instantly wished I had said something more official - Department of Housing maybe - but that would have gotten stares from people at nearby desks. I went to the elevator lobby outside the suite on 47 so that no one would hear whatever I said. She told me her name as I walked out to the lobby.
"Yes, good morning Mrs. Jones? How can I help you?"
"Well there was a gentleman here a few days ago."
"Yes that was inspector Patrick I believe."
"Well I'm afraid I didn't understand some of what he said but I seem to be in some trouble with your office."
She spoke in a slow voice.
"Let me just pull up his report here and we'll see what's going on. Let's see here Mrs. Jones, it looks like there were a lot of violations in your apartment. Fire regs, water damage, energy compliance, failure to file annual reports. All I can tell you right now is that your case will be reviewed by our compliance department in 4-6 months."
"I see, what will happen after that?"
"Well if they rule against you then you forfeit your lease and the apartment reverts to the city or the building. You can then try to rent or buy the apartment again, but typically you would have to pay market value at that point.
She didn't answer. I heard breathing.
"I see. Well thank you for your time."
She sounded so polite that I wanted to say something more.
"Of course" I said a bit too eagerly, "Is there anything else I can do for you today?"
"No thank you."
She hung up. She seemed to believe everything I said. Now we would wait a few weeks to avoid an overly suggestive coincidence and then someone from H & Co would approach with an offer to buy the apartment. I'd have to talk to Kate to see what the offer price would be and how we'd approach her.

I sort of liked the idea that I'd done something terrible - this seemed like an important experience, something I'd write about later, the descent into sin. I was pleased by how guilty I felt, almost proud of my guilt. I thought of taking the rest of the afternoon off, sitting in some dark bar, contemplating my life. I'd probably just made Mrs. Jones a lot of money. She'd have to move, to uproot and find a new place, but H & Co would pay her market value for the apartment. She'd have a few nervous weeks, but then she'd get an offer that (she thought) she couldn't refuse. So no one would actually be harmed by the exchange. But I pictured her pouring herself a scotch with an unsteady arm. Sitting in a chair that hadn't been reupholstered since the 1960s, garish and floral, taking her scotch in small stoic sips. I kept playing variations on the theme. Marion pacing, drinking, sobbing. I made a melodrama - I was the villain, she was the victim, the helpless
innocent. By the time I left work I was convinced I'd done something awful, a strangely satisfying feeling. It was like realizing some previously hidden power, learning you could lift a car in an emergency.

The next day I sent Kate a vague email alluding to "progress and developments" in the "property acquisition task." To my great relief, she didn't respond. I wasn't sure how much to tell her. I couldn't imagine her acknowledging the crude scheme we'd used. She might be pleased with the result, but she couldn't condone the method. We needed some acceptable cover, an official story that we could tell Kate and Kate could tell Robert if necessary.

Simple seemed best. I'd tell her that I'd approached Marion on behalf on H & Co and expressed interest in buying the apartment. Initially she was reluctant but my persuasive powers triumphed and she agreed to sell. Maybe I would claim to have sweetened the offer by promising assistance with relocation. Kate could believe whatever she wanted. The important thing would be the acquisition of the apartment. After years of failed efforts, I would succeed in gaining the apartment Hamilton wanted. My job would be secure, Sara and I would travel the world.

When David returned from Athens he still had almost $6,000 in cash that he hadn't spent. Whenever Robert traveled his wallet contained $8,000 of so-called petty cash. After a trip, a PC would replenish the supply and make a note of how much had been spent. It was unusual for Robert to spend more than $1,000 or $2,000, but no one was going to question his spending habits. So David simply took $5,000 from Robert's wallet and put it in his own. A few PCs might wonder what Robert had spent so much money on in Athens, but no one would dare ask Robert to account for his purchases. At lunch one day David handed me twenty 100 dollar bills. "Just found these somewhere," he smiled.
CHAPTER 38

I began looking at apartments around Manhattan. Between what David had "found" and my last few paychecks, I could afford a nice apartment, one with no rats to murder. I savored everything about the search, the concealed looks of surprise when brokers first saw how young I was, the respectful nods when I said I worked in finance. I savored the exposed brick in studios on Central Park West, the western facing windows in upper story apartments on Riverside Drive. Below a certain price point you had to ask questions - will the lock be fixed soon, does the fridge always make that rumbling noise? I was looking at places well above that price. I was in a realm where information was volunteered rather than concealed: there's a 24-hour full-service gym and pool in the basement, the roof has a seating deck with a fantastic view of the river, the restaurants in the area are great, etc. I felt like some discerning wine connoisseur who sends away bottle after bottle, nothing quite meeting the standards of his exquisitely refined palate.

Though in reality everything met my standards: that was the problem. I could see myself in almost all of the apartments I looked at. I saw myself ambling out onto various balconies in a great fleecy robe, sipping at my freshly brewed artisanal coffee as the sun rose on the city far below me. I saw myself sitting on the stoop of my brownstone just off Central Park West, eating takeout Indian food, watching the joggers and dog walkers pass by. I drifted into these reveries in sun-filled living rooms, dust motes cycling in the air, a broker waiting attentively while I fantasized, imagined myself into the vacant spaces.

Sometimes I'd try to slip Sara into the scenes. But the projector failed, the film spinning out onto the floor. She didn't belong in domestic idylls. However sumptuous the apartment, she wasn't the type to pad about in fuzzy slippers, pulling fresh cookies from the oven. She'd get restless, start pacing, fidgeting, charting possible travel itineraries. I couldn't bring myself to pick an apartment. I preferred knowing how many different ones were possible, so I kept viewing various places and postponing the choice just a few more days, always just a few.

The kiss we'd had in the Athens hotel showed no sign of repeating itself in New York. There'd been a few ripples, a pebble tossed in a pond, but the water had regained its smooth and impassive surface. I was desperate to cause another agitation, but most nights I wasn't invited upstairs to her closet. She was tired, she was sore, she was out of sorts. I was the perfect gentleman - obliging, understanding, infinitely patient. I asked her if she needed anything, told her I hoped she'd feel better soon. She usually seemed vaguely irritated by my solicitousness, which made me even more polite, which made her even more exasperated. Often she'd reply to some chivalrous offer by exhaling smoke in my face and saying "You're just trying to get laid." This was one of her favorite traps - if I denied a desire to get laid she'd question me with an amused smile "So you don't want to sleep with me?" And if I admitted the desire she'd proved her point that I was a bastard with ulterior motives. I tried a compromise answer. "Not just, I also want to do other things."
"Like what?" She'd snarl, as if it were inconceivable that I could want anything beyond sex. When she asked me that I could set a trap of my own, "Like travel, I want to travel together."
Her look would soften, she'd inch a bit closer. "Like where?"
Even the names of foreign countries were aphrodisiacs. She'd looked drugged, aroused when we talked travel. This was her dirty talk. She'd get close to me and whisper "Take me away."
CHAPTER 39

Robert was spending more time at the downtown office. No one seemed quite sure what to make of this, but everyone seemed to think it meant something. He used to come in two or three times a week. He'd spend a few hours in his office on the 50th floor, maybe have a meeting, then go back uptown. Now he was there almost every day. There was a higher likelihood of encounters on the elevators or in the lobby to the 50th floor.

Each PC could see when Robert was on the phone by looking at a button on their phone. It glowed red when he was on the phone, which meant we should wait to do routine checks or sweeps of his office. Now the light would sometimes glow for hours and we would watch in mute amazement, farmers pausing during a solar eclipse, some celestial aberration.

Sometimes I was sent into his office even when he was on the phone. Kate would decide some task was important enough to justify an intrusion and she would send me in, usually with his lunch or some papers. The distance from his door to his desk seemed vast. I took slow steps, willing my shoes to silence, trying to be as discreet as possible. I was constantly afraid that he would turn and wave me away, but he never seemed to notice my presence. I'd deliver whatever I'd come to deliver then walk quickly to the door, trying not to break into a run. I heard scraps of his conversations, but nothing sensible. I'd turn the scraps over in my head trying to fit them into some significant shape, "That would be fine." "Do you know when?" "Are we sure that will happen?" I'd tell the scraps to David, who would sit in Delphic silence, waiting for prophecy to seize him. But it never did - we didn't know what was going on. Most of the staff, QAs and PCs, were wondering with varying degrees of alarm what had changed, why Robert was suddenly at the office so much. There were whispers of calamity, murmurs of doom. Something had to be wrong if he was here so much - the market teetering, his marriage splintering.

One day I found myself alone in his office. My probation period was over and I no longer needed another PC with me whenever I was in his office or the residence. Hamilton was somewhere in the building, but his office was temporarily empty. Sunlight on green marble, the serried skyline visible in every direction. I placed a folder in the right corner of zone 3 of the desk and saw his wallet sitting next to a bag of cashews in zone 2. It was dark leather, surely one of the finest cows in Europe had died to give its skin to hold Robert's money. David had told me the wallet was stocked with $5,000 at all times. If Kate found money missing she'd assume Robert had spent it, but she'd never ask him about it. I glanced back at the door to make sure it was still shut, grabbed the wallet, flipped it open, and took a few dozen hundred bills. It was so easy. I walked back to the door, took the elevator to the 47th floor, and counted out the money. I'd just made: $3,500.

I texted Sara. Argentina next weekend? My phone buzzed a moment later. Yeah just tell me when. I would've liked a more ecstatic reply, the textual equivalent of leaping into my arms and wrapping her legs around me. But when I saw her in person she did her version of elation: a slight wry smile and a nod of the head. Compared to her usual sullenness, this was high
enthusiasm. She wanted to hear what I'd planned: which towns, which cities, which modes of travel. I hadn't the faintest idea, I told her whatever she wanted we'd do.

I tried to finalize the acquisition of the 15th floor apartment before I left. I wanted an offer signed and countersigned, something irrevocable. I emailed Kate and asked permission to make an offer. I found on file that the last offer had been made in 2004 for 1.8 million. Figuring four more years of appreciation and inflation plus a bit of surplus to sweeten the deal, I asked if I could go as high as 2.5. Kate asked why I thought her answer would suddenly change after she refused to sell for so many years. I told Kate she'd recently had a change in her family situation, her sister's husband had died and she was moving back to live with the sister in New Jersey and wanted to sell the apartment. Kate didn't reply that day. Or the next. Was she checking into my story, learning maybe that there was no sister in New Jersey? Four days later she wrote back telling me to stop all work on the task until further notice.

I was sent back to the residence for the next few days. Back to the inventory and maintenance of apricot-infused facial scrubs, perfect white tubes perpetually aligned in Susan's bathroom cabinet. I checked the expiration dates on mouthwash, replaced Robert's razor each day. I sat in the office on the 11th floor and listened to Daryl talk. He was always volunteering obscure bits of practical knowledge: how to install a muffler on a Harley, the different heat tolerances of types of tempered steel.

On Friday I began feigning a cough around noon. Every few minutes I'd hack violently and grip my head. By early afternoon Daryl and my other colleagues were insisting I go home and rest. By late afternoon I was sitting in first-class next to Sara on a plane bound for Buenos Aires.

We were there for three days. It was foreplay, not fucking, as Sara would say. We stayed in a hostel in a hip neighborhood with French architecture and used book shops. The hostel was three stories with a central interior courtyard and a winding marble staircase between levels. As we passed different people on the staircase or saw them in the hallways, Sara lectured on hostel sociology.
"You have your overly friendly men in their early thirties who spend time lurking in the lobby, always eager to tag along with girls going out for a bite. You have young Americans of both genders who are drunk and loud and intent on spreading their STDs. You have people from random countries like Iceland and Albania. Then you have people who think the hostel is your freshman dorm and want to be your friend."
"And what type are you?"
"I'm a bitch, I don't want friends or STDs."
Our room was huge. The ceiling was easily 30 feet high and double doors opened onto a miniature balcony with a view of the street. Along one wall was a set of bunk-beds. I must have looked despondent when I saw them. Sara laughed.
"Don't worry. Maybe I'll visit your bunk."

It seemed that if I wanted to kiss her we had to be in another country. Between Athens and Argentina nothing had happened between us. She was always sick or tired or busy. A brushing of the shoulders was the most physical contact we had made. But on the flight down she'd rested her
head on my shoulder and once we arrived she was all smiles and caresses. On our first day she
changed clothes in front of me. We saw a number of sites and neighborhoods that day, but this
was the highlight for me. Sun was filtering through the glass double doors and as she took off her
shirt she moved into the sun and just sort of bathed in it like it was a stream of water. Her head
tilted back, her brown hair brushing against the white of her upper back. At night she liked to
walk around the room without pants on. She wore a large t-shirt and underwear and talked. My
eyes kept veering down to her legs. She seemed to enjoy this, the farce of my divided attention.
She was talking about the future.
"I can't do a mortgage, children, a husband. No one person is good enough to justify giving up all
the other people you could meet. Economists call this opportunity cost. Am I wrong? It's the
same with places, by staying in one place for too long you just give up too much else."
I stared at her legs. I would give up a lot for her legs. I sat on the lower bunk, eyes following her
as she paced and spoke.
"I just can't do commitment," she said, flopping down next to me on the bunk, her bare legs
resting on my jeans. I turned and kissed her.
"It's just," we kissed again.
"Not," another kiss.
"For me."
She talked about commitment while we made out. After 20 minutes she sent me up to the top
bunk and that was that. It took me a long time to fall asleep.

During the day we wandered the city. The days were waiting rooms, antechambers outside the
main hall of night. I fidgeted, checked my watch, waited for the sun to set. For her the opposite
seemed true - the nights were the boring preludes to the main attraction of the streets and crowds
the next day. She loved whatever was different, even things that seemed hard to love. She loved
the fact that you couldn't flush toilet paper down the toilet and instead placed it in a small garbage
can next to the toilet.

She loved how slowly the Buenos Aires subway traveled; she loved the dirt on the hostel's
wooden floor. On the streets her gaze had the same desperate quality I'd seen in Athens, as if she
were a convicted felon about to begin a long prison term and these her last days among the free.

On the afternoon of the last day I sequestered myself in our room at the hostel and tried to write.
It was a struggle to make myself stay in the room. I felt like a father forced to visit an unwanted
child. After a few minutes I found myself sneaking glimpses out the double doors at the street.
Old women carrying grocery bags, young men on motorcycles - life was out there, I told myself.
I needed more experience before I could begin to write. So I sat on the balcony and watched the
street life. Then I went out and walked around the neighborhood. After a few minutes I wound up
browsing through used book stores. I loved the stacks of yellowing paperbacks, the obscure first
editions, the twisting aisles and aging bespectacled clerks dosing behind desks. I bought a first
edition of Neruda and went to the hostel to read.

That night we ate a long dinner at a small restaurant. Steak and french fries and red wine. It was
our last night. After desert she set down her fork and said,
"Tonight we can fuck."
Before I could say anything she added,
"But it doesn't mean anything. We're just fucking - two people, in a room, on a bed. Bang bang bang. That's it."
"I'm sensing some role reversal here."
"Are you calling me a man or yourself a woman?"
"Both I think."
"Well whatever. Like I said, I don't do commitment. Remember those warnings I gave you the first time we met?"
We went back to the hostel and she took her clothes off, matter of fact about it. When she was totally naked she lay down on the bottom bunk and lit a cigarette.
"Do your worst," she said, exhaling.
CHAPTER 40

I expected perfection, transcendence. I felt sleeping with Sara would be roughly what literal Christians expect heaven will be: radiant, unspeakable bliss. So I was dismayed by the hum of engines idling in the street outside our room, the noise of vacuuming from down the hall, the signs of the mundane creeping in. We kept partially slipping from the bed, but instead of rolling onto the floor in a manic fit of passion, the thud of impact only intensifying our lust, it was simply uncomfortable, we couldn't seem to make the proper use of space. Everything was disconcertingly real: the dark stubble in her armpits when she reached behind her to grip the posts of the bed, the rattle in her breath that sometimes broke into a cough, the scratchy wool of the quilt beneath us.

During sex she was passive, withdrawn. No frenzy, no noises, just a sense of absence. Sounds of our breath and motion. Her face like someone trying to get interested in a film they're watching, waiting for the plot to twist. The silence made me highly conscious of extraneous particulars. Shapes of stains on the walls. Noises from the street like some surreal soundtrack to our movements.

It was over sooner than I would have liked. I gasped and collapsed forward onto her, provoking a gasp of a different sort followed by the words "can't breathe." I rolled to one side and she sprang from the bed and walked to the bathroom. I'd imagined a bit more lingering. Cuddling and caressing, passionate murmuring in ears. Instead she returned from the bathroom and began pulling on a dry change of clothes, her usual bluntness unsoftened by any note of romance.

"Well," she said, sliding on a pair of tattered jeans, "that was quick."

I'd been hoping this would change everything, that she'd suddenly realize she couldn't live without me. But she didn't seem to think anything terribly important had happened. She pulled on dry socks, opened the shutters, looked out the window. Neon signs were glowing down the length of the block. She wore only jeans and white socks. She lit a cigarette. "Well, we can try again later," she said, as if it were an Internet connection or phone call.

When we returned to New York, she shouldered her pack and told me that we should "do it" again some time. Whether she meant travel or fuck wasn't clear, but doing one seemed a precondition for the other. I'd feigned illness for part of Friday and sent an email from Buenos Aires on Monday claiming that I was feeling too bad to come to work.

On Tuesday the downtown office was buzzing with two bits of news. The first and most important item was that Leah's bat mitzvah was only six months away. Every aspect of the party would have to be planned with H & Co's typical exactness. There would be a peer review process for frosting selection, a committee tasked with finding dozens of amusing yet profound quotes from Jewish figures that would be printed in calligraphic font on white placards placed on each
table. Better yet, the staff could find an engraver to carve the sayings into the wood of trees native to Israel that would grow through the center of each table. Jerry Seinfeld would be approached to do a 15 minute stand-up routine. The arrangement of tables and seating locations of various guests would be determined according to a number of criteria: ideal age range of guests at a given table, ease of mingling, proximity to the Hamilton's table as an indication of the friend's value. Committees were already forming to handle different aspects of the event: seating, entertainment, music, refreshments, food, guest relations and invitations, venue scouting, budget and operations. The emails between staff members were already flying, the tasks being categorized and prioritized, the PCs racing about the city armed only with their company credit cards.

The second bit of news was something about bank failures. No one seemed terribly concerned about it. I heard words like mortgage-backed securities and tronching and even absorbed a sense of what they meant by talking to different QAs. But mostly I took cues from their attitude. They were like clever schoolkids who laugh when their dense peers get in trouble. The QAs knew more than the PCs about the intricacies of the market and they didn't seem worried. They thought the fund might even profit from the failing of certain banks that they'd bet against.

A few weeks later I started hearing the first signs of concern. Bank failings and the economy were in the headlines almost every day, and since it was hard to spend eight hours on bat mitzvah planning PCs wound up reading the articles online and repeating bits of them to one another in somber tones while retrieving organic root beer from the staff kitchen.

One of the first things David had ever told me about H & Co was that only two things could endanger PCs' jobs. The first was Susan suffering from the fear that a staff of forty serving her every need might be excessive. Judging by the scale and extent of the bat mitzvah preparations, this wasn’t happening. The second was an economic downturn. With each passing day the PCs grew more nervous about the market. People greeted Kate with exceptional cheerfulness each morning and praised her even as she blamed them (“Good point, I should have noticed that!”) But we knew she wasn't the ultimate source of power. The ultimate source of power was wearing Tunisian cotton and working in desk zone two of six on the 50th floor. Many PCs started working late. I began getting ready to go home at five, glanced around, and saw that no one else was moving. Soon I was staying late too.
CHAPTER 41

One of the QAs gave David and me a metaphor in the staff kitchen one afternoon. The crisis, he said, was a huge dark wave moving towards shore. No one really knew when it would hit or what the damage would be, but they knew it was coming.
"Well can’t we move to higher ground?"
"It's a flat island" he said.
"Well what about sandbags, fortifications, preparing for impact while there is still time?"
"I suppose we could all keep money in cash under our pillows."
The QA wandered off, sipping a coke.
"He's poetic for a QA."
"Yeah, he made it sound like death - a dark wave that will submerge all sooner or later."

The office atmosphere was unusually tense. Not only were various PCs striving to outdo each other with epic feats of bat mitzvah planning, but Kate was even harder to please than usual. One PC was chastised for arriving five minutes late in the morning, another was scolded for the subject she’d used in an email to Susan. "Flower Question" was too casual, appropriate perhaps for an email to another staff member, but not an email to Susan. It was also too vague - Susan should immediately know the nature of a given email simply by reading its subject. She should also know the relative priority of the question. And if possible, the PC should suggest an answer based on research. Kate codified some of these principles into a treatise concerning the titling of emails sent to family members. In a moment of brilliant insight, one PC suggested that the priority designation be placed first. That way, family members could avoid wasting their time reading the entire heading before finding out the priority: "Priority low: Choice of Marigolds Vs. Tulips for Table Bouquets" was an improvement over "Choice of Marigolds Vs. Tulips for Table Bouquets Priority Low." Such a change could save the Hamiltons valuable seconds each day. Kate commended the PC for making such a good suggestion and amended her treatise accordingly. These were the kinds of changes people hoped would keep them employed.

The next week the secretaries were fired. One day they were there, the next day they were replaced by temps paid hourly and not given health care. David was morose - he'd flirted intensely with most of the secretaries for the past two years. Most of the PCs were terrified. The dark wave had hit the shore and demolished a few coastal shacks, mere secretaries. It wasn't that they felt any particular concern for the shack dwellers. It was what this prophesied for their jobs that worried them.

The goddess rumor was everywhere. Robert was planning massive layoffs. The value of the primary fund had dropped 30% in a single day. Nothing was confirmed or denied, everything just secondhand information. David still left at five each day and took long lunches. I admired but lacked his nerve. I stayed late most days, even if I had nothing to do. I'd sit at my desk and simulate the appearance of work, jotting things on a pad, shuffling files about the 15th floor into different arrangements.
A few days after the secretaries were fired, Kate sent an email to the entire personal staff. She realized that given the state of the market, many people were wondering about job security. She reassured us that our jobs were not in danger, but noted that there would be new and more stringent standards for verifying and documenting all work-related expenses. All receipts would now be checked and any purchase over $500 would require prior approval.

Two days later I got a phone call from Kate in the early afternoon. I was out buying chocolate bars and organic canned chili to replace some soon-to-be-expired items in the emergency food supply room on the 11th floor.
"Where are you?" She asked, her tone more abrupt than usual.
"I'm at the store, replenishing a few items."
It would never do to say "getting a few things." Large Latinate words had become my default whenever possible.
"I need you at the downtown office ASAP."
"Should I purchase the items first?"
"Forget the food, come downtown right away."
CHAPTER 42

I left my half-filled cart in the aisle and took a cab downtown. I rode the elevator to the 50th floor and knocked on the door to Kate's office. Before I'd sat down she'd said, "Hand me your keys."
I gave them to her.
"And your credit card."
I took it out and put it on her desk.
"Do you know why you're here?"
I shook my head, pictured a wave crashing onto a beach.
"We were just looking at your credit card statement from Athens. You spent almost $4,000 during the three days you were sick."
I shifted in my seat.
"Well I wasn't that sick."
She stared at me for a long moment.
"There was a cash advance for 1500, five tavernas for almost 800 euros, a second cash advance, do I need to go on?"
I'd imagined some variant of this scene so many times. I'd always expected something dramatic, a denunciation in front of the entire 47th floor, a public shaming.
"Needless to say this is your last day as an H & Co employee. I'll escort you to your desk on 47 so that you can collect your belongings."
"I'd just like to say - David wasn't aware of any of this. He thought I was sick for those three days."
She looked at me and frowned.
"That's something we'll determine."

On the 47th floor she watched as I placed a few ballpoint pens, half a bagel, and a book by Flaubert into various pockets. Other PCs began to notice that something unusual was happening. Kate stood and stared at me as I collected my things. I saw PCs and QAs sneaking glances, looking guilty and fascinated. Would I break down, would Kate start screaming? Neither happened. I walked out to the elevator lobby, avoiding eye contact with anyone. Kate rode the elevator down with me and followed me out to the lobby, through the revolving doors and to the street. She said nothing until we were on the sidewalk.
"If you hear from us again it will be through an attorney."
She turned and walked back inside.

I was more surprised than I should have been. It had all happened in under 40 minutes: the cab ride, the meeting with Kate, the supervised collection of belongings. There were clues I could have noticed ever since she pulled me from the 15th floor task.

I wanted to travel to every continent with Sara, to choose one of the many luxurious apartments I looked at, to have more $40 lunches with David and $100 dinners with Sara. I wanted to pay off
all of my student loans, save enough to help my parents retire, make enough that I could finally take a few years and start writing.

I took the next few weeks to get my life in order. After paying off my credit card debt, I had only a few thousand dollars saved. This could last a few months if I lived cheap. I bought peanut butter and whole wheat bread at the store. I ate sandwiches for days at a time until I couldn't bear it and splurged on a plate of rice and beans. I texted Sara one day: "was fired." She replied "that sucks." "Yeah not sure what I'll do." "Are you broke?" "Pretty much." "So no more traveling?" "Not any time soon." "Well that sucks, good luck with everything." "Are you free tonight?" "Tonight is bad."

The next night was also bad. It took me a while to get the point. I texted her each day but she was always busy. One day, she didn't reply to my text, and the next day was the same. I never heard from her again.

The painter and the photographer were starting a magazine. At least they wanted to. They thought it would be great - commercially viable, but edgy and provocative. Multimedia, a forum for everything they wanted to express. They wanted my help. So I listened to their plans, swore to do everything I could. They were convinced that it would free them from their day jobs, it would interest readers worldwide. It was only be a matter of months.

Now and then David and I had lunch. He gave me reports on the steadily increasing panic at H & Co. Some QAs had been fired and the PCs were all freaked out. The company was shedding employees each week but planning for the bat mitzvah proceeded smoothly. One day David mentioned that the phantom noise had begun again. No one knew how or why it was recurring. "He's obsessed. I'm no Freudian, but it is hard to resist a bit of interpretation. The noise is just a microcosm of the market, something chaotic and unpredictable he's convinced he'll be able to control."

I needed a job, so I rode the train around the city, reading books and walking through different neighborhoods. I always carried a notepad with me in case inspiration deigned to strike. One day in Brooklyn I walked past Daryl's Garage. I didn't know how many auto mechanics named Daryl there were in Brooklyn, but it seemed likely that this was the Daryl from H & Co.

I stood outside the shop for a moment. I knew it was probably pointless, but I suddenly saw myself in grease-stained overalls, sliding out from beneath the hood of a truck, using words like axle and wrench, drinking beer with brawny working-class buddies in some rough Brooklyn bar. I could work at Daryl's garage. Use my hands, get dirty, become an honest laborer.

A bell rang as I pushed open the door. A guy in his early 30s looked up from a paper.
"Help you?"
"Yeah. Are you guys hiring or anything?"
"You a mechanic?"
"No."
"Ever worked with cars?"
"No."
"Know anything about cars?"
"No. Not really."
"Well I don't think we're hiring right now."
I walked away from the garage and found a bench in the sun. This was it, I had to write something. But soon I felt myself getting drowsy. I fought briefly to stay awake, but decided there was no harm in stretching out on the bench and waiting for the muse to descend. After a few minutes I dozed off. I dreamed that the magazine had become wildly successful. We had all quit our day jobs, moved to stylish apartments across Europe and now divided our time between having sex with beautiful women, writing books and eating pastries.