

AWAIT YOUR REPLY

A NOVEL

DAN CHAON



BALLANTINE BOOKS

ALSO BY DAN CHAON

Among the Missing
Fitting Ends
You Remind Me of Me

AWAIT YOUR REPLY

A Novel



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BALLANTINE BOOKS

NEW YORK

For Sheila

PART ONE



I myself, from the very beginning,
Seemed to myself like someone's dream or delirium
Or a reflection in someone else's mirror,
Without flesh, without meaning, without a name.
Already I knew the list of crimes
That I was destined to commit.

—ANNA AKHMATOVA,
“Northern Elegies”

We are on our way to the hospital, Ryan's father says.

Listen to me, Son:

You are not going to bleed to death.

Ryan is still aware enough that his father's words come in through the edges, like sunlight on the borders of a window shade. His eyes are shut tight and his body is shaking and he is trying to hold up his left arm, to keep it elevated. *We are on our way to the hospital*, his father says, and Ryan's teeth are chattering, he clenches and unclenches them, and a series of wavering colored lights—greens, indigos—plays along the surface of his closed eyelids.

On the seat beside him, in between him and his father, Ryan's severed hand is resting on a bed of ice in an eight-quart Styrofoam cooler.

The hand weighs less than a pound. The nails are trimmed and there are calluses on the tips of the fingers from guitar playing. The skin is now bluish in color.

This is about three A.M. on a Thursday morning in May in rural Michigan. Ryan doesn't have any idea how far away the hospital might be but he repeats with his father *we are on the way to the hospital we are on the way to the hospital* and he wants to believe so badly that it's true, that it's not just one of those things that you tell people to keep them calm. But he's not sure. Gazing out all he can see is the night trees leaning over the road, the car pursuing its pool of headlights and darkness, no towns, no buildings ahead, darkness, road, moon.

A few days after Lucy graduated from high school, she and George Orson left town in the middle of the night. They were not fugitives—not exactly—but it was true that no one knew that they were leaving, and it was also true that no one would know where they had gone.

They had agreed that a degree of discretion, a degree of secrecy, was necessary. Just until they got things figured out. George Orson was not only her boyfriend, but also her former high school history teacher, which had complicated things back in Pompey, Ohio.

This wasn't actually as bad as it might sound. Lucy was eighteen, almost nineteen—a legal adult—and her parents were dead, and she had no real friends to speak of. She had been living at their parents' house with her older sister, Patricia, but the two of them had never been close. Also, she had various aunts and uncles and cousins she hardly talked to. As for George Orson, he had no connections at all that she knew of.

And so: why not? They would make a clean break. A new life.

Still, she might have preferred to run away together to somewhere different.

They arrived in Nebraska after a few days of driving, and she was sleeping, so she didn't notice when they got off the interstate. When she opened her eyes, they were driving along a length of empty highway, and George Orson's hand was resting demurely on her thigh: a sweet habit he had, resting his palm on her leg. She could see herself in the side mirror, her hair rippling, her sunglasses reflecting the motionless stretches of lichen-green prairie grass. She sat up.

"Where are we?" she said, and George Orson looked over at her. His eyes distant and melancholy. It made her think of being a child, a child in that old small-town family car, her father's thick, calloused plumber's hands gripping the wheel and her mother in the passenger seat with a cigarette even though she was a nurse, the window open a crack for the smoke to trail out of, and her sister asleep in the backseat mouth-breathing behind their father, and Lucy also in the backseat, opening her eyes a crack, the shadows of trees running across her face, and thinking *Where are we?*

She sat up straighter, shaking this memory away.

"Almost there," George Orson murmured, as if he were remembering a sad thing.

And when she opened her eyes again, there was the motel. They had parked in front of it: a tower rising up in silhouette over them.

It had taken Lucy a moment to realize that the place was supposed to be a lighthouse. Or rather—the front of the place, the façade, was in the shape of a lighthouse. It was a large tube-shaped structure made of cement blocks, perhaps sixty feet high, wide at the base and narrowing as it went upward, and painted in red and white barber-pole stripes.

THE LIGHTHOUSE MOTEL, said a large unlit neon sign—fancy nautical lettering, as if made of knotted ropes—and Lucy sat there in the car, in George Orson's Maserati, gaping.

To the right of this lighthouse structure was an L-shaped courtyard of perhaps fifteen motel units; and to the left of it, at the very crest of the hill, was the old house, the house where George Orson's parents once lived. Not exactly a mansion but formidable out here on the open prairie, a big old Victorian two-story home with all the trappings of a haunted house: a turret and wraparound porch, dormers and corbeled chimneys, a gable roof and scalloped shingles. No other houses in sight, barely any other sign of civilization, barely anything but the enormous Nebraska sky bending over them.

For a moment Lucy had the notion that this was a joke, a corny roadside attraction or amusement park. They had pulled up in the summer twilight, and there was the forlorn lighthouse tower of the motel with the old house silhouetted behind it, ridiculously creepy. Lucy thought that there may as well have been a full moon and a hoot owl in a bare tree, and George Orson let out a breath.

"So here we are," George Orson said. He must have known how it would look to her.

"This is it?" Lucy said, and she couldn't keep the incredulousness out of her voice. "Wait," she said. "George? This is where we're going to live?"

"For the time being," George Orson said. He glanced at her ruefully, as if she disappointed him a little. "Only for the time being, honey," he said, and she noticed that there were some tumbleweeds stuck in the dead hedges on one side of the motel courtyard. Tumbleweeds! She had never seen such a thing before, except in movies about ghost towns of the Old West, and it was hard not to be a little freaked out.

"How long has it been closed?" she said. "I hope it's not full of mice or—"

"No, no," George Orson said. "There's a cleaning woman coming out fairly regularly, so I'm sure it's not too bad. It's not abandoned or anything."

She could feel his eyes following her as she got out and walked around the front of the car and up toward the red door of the Lighthouse. Above the door it said: OFFICE. And there was another unlit tube of neon, which said:

NO VACANCY.

It had once been a fairly popular motel. That's what George Orson had told her as they were driving through Indiana or Iowa or one of those states. It wasn't exactly a *resort*, he'd said, but a pretty fancy place—"Back when there was a lake," he'd said, and she hadn't quite understood what he meant.

She'd said: "It sounds romantic." This was before she'd seen it. She'd had an image of one of those seaside sort of places that you read about in novels, where shy British people went and fell in love and had epiphanies.

"No, no," George Orson said. "Not exactly." He had been trying to warn her. "I wouldn't call it romantic. Not at this point," he said. He explained that the lake—it was a reservoir, actually—had started to dry up because of the drought, all the greedy farmers, he said, they just kept watering and watering their government-subsidized crops, and before anyone knew it, the lake was a tenth of what it had once been. "Then all of the tourist stuff began to dry up as well, naturally," George Orson said. "It's hard to do any fishing or water-skiing or swimming on a dry lake bed."

He had explained it well enough, but it wasn't until she looked down from the top of the hill

that she understood.

He was serious. There wasn't a lake anymore. There was nothing but a bare valley—a crater that had once held water. A path led down to the "beach," and there was a wooden dock extending out into an expanse of sand and high yellow prairie grass, various scrubby plants that she imagined would eventually turn into tumbleweeds. The remains of an old buoy lay on its side in the windblown dirt. She could see what had once been the other side of the lake, the opposite shore rising up about five miles or so away across the empty basin.

Lucy turned back to watch as George Orson opened the trunk of the car and extracted the largest of their suitcases.

"Lucy?" he said, trying to make his voice cheerful and solicitous. "Shall we?"

She watched as he walked past the tower of the Lighthouse office and up the cement stairs that led to the old house.

By the time the first rush of recklessness had begun to burn off, Miles was already nearing the arctic circle. He had been driving across Canada for days and days by that point, sleeping for while in the car and then waking to go on again, heading northward along what highways he could find, a cluster of maps origami-ed on the passenger seat beside him. The names of the places he passed had become more and more fantastical—Destruction Bay, the Great Slave Lake, Ddha Ghro, Tombstone Mountain—and when he came at last upon Tsiigehtchic, he sat in his idling car in front of the town’s welcome sign, staring at the scramble of letters as if his eyesight might be faulty, some form of sleep-deprivation dyslexia. But no. According to one of the map books he had bought, “Tsiigehtchic” was a Gwich’in word that meant “mouth of the river of iron.” According to the book, he had now reached the confluence of the Mackenzie and the Arctic Red rivers.

WELCOME TO TSIIGEHTCHIC!

Located on the site of a traditional Gwich’in fishing camp. In 1868 the Oblate Fathers started a mission here. By 1902 a trading post was located here. R.C.M.P. Constable Edgar “Spike” Millen, stationed at Tsiigehtchic was killed by the mad trapper Albert Johnson in the shootout on January 30, 1932 in the Rat River area.

The Gwich’in retain close ties to the land today. You can see net fishing year round as well as the traditional method of making dryfish and dry meat. In the winter, trappers are busy in the bush seeking valuable fur animals.

ENJOY YOUR VISIT TO OUR COMMUNITY!

He mouthed the letters, and his chapped lips kept adhering to each other. “T-s-i-i-g-e-h-t-c-h-i-c,” he said, under his breath, and just then a cold thought began to unfold in the back of his mind.

What am I doing? he thought. Why am I doing this?

The drive had begun to feel more and more like a hallucination by that point. Somewhere on the way, the sun had begun to stop rising and setting; it appeared to move slightly to and fro across the sky, but he couldn’t be sure. Along this part of the Dempster Highway, a silvery white powder was scattered on the dirt road. Calcium? The powder seemed to glow—but then again, with this queer sunlight, so did everything: the grass and the sky and even the dirt had a fluorescent quality, as if lit from within.

He was sitting there by the side of the road, his book open in front of him on the steering wheel, a pile of clothes in the backseat, and the boxes of papers and notebooks and journals and letters he had collected over the years. He was wearing sunglasses, shivering a little, his patch

facial hair a worn yellow-brown, the color of a coffee stain. The CD player in his car was broken ~~and the radio played only a murky blend of static and distant garbled voices.~~ There was no cell phone reception, of course. An air freshener in the shape of a Christmas tree was hanging from the rearview mirror, spinning in the breath of the defroster.

Up ahead, not too far now, was the town of Inuvik, and the wide delta that led to the Arctic Ocean, and also—he hoped—his twin brother, Hayden.

The man said, “Above the wrist? Or below the wrist?”

The man had a sleepy, almost affectless voice, the voice you might hear if you called a hotline for computer technical support. He looked at Ryan’s father blandly.

“Ryan, I want you to tell your father to be reasonable,” the man said, but Ryan didn’t really say anything because he was crying silently. He and his father were bound to chairs at the kitchen table, and Ryan’s father was shuddering, and his long dark hair fell in a tent around his face. But when he looked up, he had a troublingly stubborn look in his eyes.

The man sighed. He carefully pushed the sleeve of Ryan’s shirt up above his elbow and placed his finger on the small rounded bone at the edge of Ryan’s wrist. It was called the “ulnar styloid,” Ryan remembered. Some biology class he had taken, once. He didn’t know why that term came to him so easily.

Above the wrist ... the man said to Ryan’s father ... or below the wrist?

Ryan was trying to reach a disconnected state—a *Zen* state, he thought—though the truth was that the more he tried to lift his mind out of his body, the more aware he was of the corporeal. He could feel himself trembling. He could feel the salt water trickling out of his nose and eyes, drying on his face. He could feel the duct tape that held him to the kitchen chair, the strips across his bare forearms, his chest, his calves and ankles.

He closed his eyes and tried to imagine his spirit lifting toward the ceiling. He would drift out of the kitchen, where he and his father were pinned to the hard-backed chairs, past the cluttered construction of dirty dishes piled on the counter by the sink, the toaster with a bagel still peeping up out of it; he would waft through the archway and into the living room, where a couple of black-T-shirted henchmen were carrying computer parts out of the bedrooms, dragging matte black tails of electrical cording and cables along behind them. His spirit would follow them out the front door, past the white van they were tossing stuff into, and on down his father’s driveway, traveling the rural Michigan highway, the moonlight flickering through the branches of trees. As his spirit gained velocity, the luminous road signs emerging out of the darkness as he swept up like an airplane and the patterns of house lights and roads and streams that speckled and crisscrossed the earth growing smaller. *Wooooooooooooooooooooo*—like a balloon with the air let out of it, a siren, a wailing wind. Like a person screaming.

He squeezed his eyes, tightened his teeth against one another as his left hand was grasped and tilted. He was trying to think of something else.

Music? A landscape, a sunset? A beautiful girl’s face?

“Dad,” he could hear himself saying, through chattering teeth. “Dad, please be reasonable.”

please, please be—”

He would not think about the cutting device the man had shown them. It was just a length of wire, a very thin razor wire, with a rubber handle attached to each end of it.

He wouldn't think about the way his father wouldn't meet his eyes.

He wouldn't think about his hand, the wire looped once around his wrist, his hand garroted, the sharp wire tightening. Slicing smoothly through skin and muscle. There would be a hitch, a snag when it reached the bone, but it would cut through that, too.

And Lucy awoke and it was all a bad dream.

She was dreaming that she was still trapped in her old life, still in a classroom in high school and she couldn't open her eyes even though she knew that there was an asshole boy in the desk behind her who was flicking stuff into her hair—boogers, or possibly tiny rolled-up pellets of chewing gum—but she couldn't wake up even though someone was knocking at the door, a secretary was at the door with a note that said, *Lucy Lattimore, please report to the principal's office. Your parents have been in a terrible accident—*

But no. She opened her eyes, and it was merely an early evening in June, still sunny outside, and she was asleep in front of the television in the alcove room in George Orson's parents' house, and an old black-and-white movie was playing, a videotape she had found in a stack next to the ancient cabinet television set—

“Why don't you stay here awhile and rest, and listen to the sea?” said the lady in the movie.

She could hear George Orson chopping on the cutting board in the kitchen—an intent tapping rhythm that had woven its way into her dream.

“It's so soothing,” said the woman in the movie. “Listen to it. Listen to the sea....”

It took Lucy awhile to realize that the tapping had stopped, and she lifted her head and there was George Orson standing in the doorway in his red cook's apron, holding the silver vegetable knife loosely at his side.

“Lucy?” George Orson said.

She sat up, trying to recalibrate, as George Orson tilted his head.

He was handsome, she thought, handsome in a collared-shirt-and-sweater intellectual way that you hardly ever saw back in Pompey, Ohio, with close-cropped brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard and an expression that could be both sympathetic and intense. His teeth were perfect, his body trim and even secretly athletic, though in fact he was, he said, “a little over thirty.”

His eyes were a stunning sea-green, a color so unusual that at first she'd assumed it was artificial, some fancy colored contacts.

He blinked as if he could feel her thinking about his eyes.

“Lucy? Are you okay?” he said.

Not really. But she sat up, straightened her back, smiled.

“You look like you've been hypnotized,” he said.

“I'm fine,” she said. She put her palms against her hair, smoothing it down.

She paused; George Orson gazed at her with that mind reader look he had.

“*I'm fine,*” she said.

~~She and George Orson were going to be living in the old house behind the motel, just for a short time, just until they got things figured out. Just until “the heat” was off a bit, he told her. She couldn’t tell how much of this was a joke. He often spoke ironically. He could do imitations and accents and quotations from movies and books.~~

We can pretend we are “fugitives on the lam,” he said, wryly, as they sat in a parlor or sitting room, with fancy lamps and wingback chairs that had been draped with sheets, and he put his hand on her thigh, petting her leg with a slow, reassuring stroke. She put her Diet Coke onto the doily on the old coffee table, and a bead of perspiration ran down the side of the can.

She didn’t see why they couldn’t be fugitives in Monaco or the Bahamas or even the Riviera Maya area of Mexico.

But—“Be patient,” George Orson said, and gave her one of his looks, somewhere between teasing and tender, bending his head to look into her eyes when she glanced away. “Trust me,” he said in that confiding voice he had.

And so, okay, she had to admit that things could be worse. She could still be in Pompey, Ohio.

She had believed—had been led to believe—that they were going to be rich, and yes of course that was one of the things that she wanted. “A lot of money,” George Orson had told her, lowering his voice, lowering his eyes sidelong in that shy conspiratorial way. “Let’s just say that I made some ... *investments*,” he said, as if the word were a code that they both understood.

That was the day that they left. They were traveling down Interstate 80 toward this piece of property that George Orson had inherited from his mother. “The Lighthouse,” he said. The Lighthouse Motel.

They’d been on the road for an hour or so, and George Orson was in a playful mood. He had once known how to say hello in one hundred different languages, and he was trying to see if he could remember them all.

“*Zdravstvuite*,” George Orson said. “*Ni hao*.”

“*Bonjour*,” said Lucy, who had loathed her two required years of French, her teacher, the gently unforgiving Mme Fournier, repeating those unpronounceable vowels over and over.

“*Päivää*,” George Orson said. “*Konichiwa. Kehro haal aahei*.”

“*Hola*,” Lucy said, in the deadpan voice that George Orson found so funny.

“You know, Lucy,” George Orson said cheerfully. “If we’re going to be world travelers, you’re going to have to learn new languages. You don’t want to be one of those American tourist types who assume that everyone speaks English.”

“I don’t?”

“Not unless you want everyone to hate you.” And he smiled his sad, lopsided grin. He let his hand rest lightly on her knee. “You’re going to be so *cosmopolitan*,” he said tenderly.

This had always been one of the big things that she liked about him. He had a great vocabulary and even from the beginning, he’d treated her as if she knew what he was talking about. As they had a secret, the two of them.

“You’re a remarkable person, Lucy.” This was one of the first things that he’d ever said to her.

They were sitting in his classroom after school, she had ostensibly come to talk about the test for the next week, but that had faded away fairly quickly. “I honestly don’t think you have anything to worry about,” he’d told her, and then he waited. That smile, those green eyes.

“You’re different from other people around here,” he said.

Which was, she thought, true. But how did *he* know? No one else in her school thought so. Even though she did better than anyone else in the entire school on the SAT, even though she earned A’s in nearly all her classes, no one, neither teachers nor students, acted as if she were “remarkable.” Most of the teachers resented her, they didn’t really like ambitious students, she thought, students who wanted to leave Pompey behind, and the other students thought that she was a freak—possibly crazy. She hadn’t been aware that she had the habit of muttering sarcastic things under her breath until she discovered that quite a number of people in her school thought that she had Tourette’s syndrome. She didn’t have any idea where or when such a rumor had started, though she suspected that it might have originated with her honors English teacher, Mr. Lovejoy, whose interpretations of literature were so insipid that Lucy could barely contain—apparently had failed to contain—her scorn.

But George Orson, on the other hand, actually liked to hear what she had to say. He encouraged her ironic view of the great figures of American history, actually chuckled appreciatively at some of her comments while the other students stared at her with stern boredom. “It’s clear that you have a brilliant mind,” he wrote on one of her papers, and then when she came to see him after class to talk about the upcoming exam he told her that he knew what it was like to be different—misunderstood—

“You know what I’m talking about, Lucy,” he said. “I know you feel it.”

Perhaps she did. She sat there, and let him turn his intense green eyes on her, an intimate, oddly probing look, both ironic and heartfelt at the same time, and she drew in a small breath. She was well aware that she was not regarded as pretty—not in the conventional world of Pompey High School, at least. Her hair was thick and wavy, and she could not afford to have it cut in a way that made it more manageable, and her mouth was too small and her face was too long. Though maybe in a different context, she’d imagined hopefully, in a different time period she might have been beautiful. A girl in a Modigliani painting.

Still, she wasn’t used to being looked in the eye. She fingered the silk scarf she was wearing, an item she’d found in a thrift store, which she thought might have a slight Modigliani quality, and George Orson regarded her thoughtfully.

“Have you ever heard the term ‘sui generis’?” he said.

Her lips parted—as if this were a test, a vocabulary word, a spelling bee. On the wall were various inspirational social studies posters. ELEANOR ROOSEVELT, 1884–1962: “NO ONE CAN MAKE YOU FEEL INFERIOR WITHOUT YOUR CONSENT.” she shook her head, slightly uncomfortable.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not really.”

“That’s what you are, I think,” George Orson said. “Sui generis. It means ‘one of a kind.’ But not in the phony, feel-good, self-help way—everyone is an individual, blah, blah, blah, just to boost the self-esteem of the mediocre.

“No, no,” he said. “It means that we invent ourselves. It means that you’re beyond categories—beyond standardized test scores, beyond the petty sociology of where you’re from and what your dad does and what college you get into. You’re outside of that. That’s what I recognized about you right away. *You invent yourself,*” he said. “Do you know what I mean?”

They looked at each other for a long time. Eleanor Roosevelt waved down at them, smiling and a hope tightened inside her, like a warm, soft fist. “Yes,” she said.

Yes. She liked that idea: *You invent yourself.*

They were making a clean break. A new life. Wasn't that what she'd always wanted? Maybe they could even change their names, George Orson said.

“I get a little tired of being George Orson,” he told her conversationally. They were driving through the middle of Illinois in his Maserati with the top down and her unmanageable hair was rippling behind her and she was wearing sunglasses. She was gazing critically at herself in the side mirror. “How about you?” George Orson said.

“How about me, what?” Lucy said. She lifted her head.

“What would you be if you weren't Lucy?” George Orson said.

Which was a good question.

She hadn't answered him, though she found herself thinking about it, imagining—for example—that she would like to be the type of girl who had the name of a famous city. *Vienna*, she thought, that would be pretty. Or *London*, which would be wry and vaguely mysterious, in a tomboyish way. *Alexandria*: proud and regal.

“Lucy,” on the other hand, was the name of a mousy girl. A comical name. People thought of the television actress, with her slapstick ineptitude, or the bossy girl in the *Peanuts* comic strip. They thought of the horrible old country song that her father used to sing: “You picked a fine time to leave me, Lucille.”

She would be glad to be rid of her name, if she could think of a good replacement.

Anastasia, she thought. *Eleanor*?

But she didn't say anything because a part of her thought that such names might sound a little vulgar and schoolgirl-ish. Names that a low-class girl from Pompey, Ohio, would think were elegant.

One of the nice things about George Orson was that he didn't know much about her past.

They didn't talk, for example, about Lucy's mother and father, the car wreck the summer before her senior year, an old man running a stoplight while the two of them were on their way to the Home Depot to buy some tomato plants that were on sale. Killed, both of them, though her mother had lingered for a day in a coma.

The fact that people at school had known about it had always felt like an invasion of privacy. The secretary had given Lucy condolences, and Lucy had nodded, graciously she thought, though actually she found it kind of repulsive that this stranger should know her business. *How dare you* Lucy thought later.

But George Orson had never said a word of condolence, though she guessed that probably he knew. He knew the basics, anyway.

He knew, for example, that she lived with her sister, Patricia, though Lucy was relieved that he had never actually seen her sister. Patricia, herself only twenty-two, not very bright, Patricia who worked at the Circle K Convenient Mart most nights and with whom, since the funeral, Lucy had

less and less contact.

Patricia was one of those girls that people had been making fun of for almost all the years of her life. She had a thick, spittley lisp, easily imitated and cartoonish, a bungler's speech impediment. She wasn't fat exactly, but lumpy in the wrong places, already middle-aged-looking in junior high, with an unfortunately broad, hen-like figure.

Once, in grade school, they were walking to school together and some boys chased them, throwing pebbles.

*Patricia, Patrasha,
Has a great big ass-a!*

the boys sang.

And that had been the last time that Lucy had walked with Patricia. After that, they had begun to go their separate ways once they left for school, and Patricia had never said anything; she had just accepted the fact that even her sister wouldn't want to walk with her.

After their parents died, Patricia had become Lucy's guardian—perhaps officially still was. Though now Lucy was almost nineteen. Not that it mattered in any case, because Patricia had no idea where she was.

She did feel a pang about that.

She had the image of Patricia and her pet rats—the rats' cages stacked in the eaves, and her sister coming home late from her job at the Circle K, kneeling there in that red and blue vest with the name tag that said PATARCIA, talking to the rats in that crooning voice, the one rat, Mr. Niffle, with an enormous tumor coming out of its stomach that it was dragging around and her sister had paid to have the veterinarian remove it and then it *grew back*, the tumor, and still Patricia persisted. Showering the dying creature with love, buying it plastic toys, talking baby talk, making another appointment at the vet.

Lucy was glad that she had never told George Orson about Mr. Niffle, just as she was glad that he'd never seen the house she had grown up in, where she and Patricia had continued to live. Her father used to call it "the shack," affectionately. "I'll meet you back here at the shack," he'd say when he left for work in the morning.

It didn't occur to her until later that it *was* basically a shack. Ramshackle, haphazard, a living room and kitchen that bled into each other, the bathroom so cramped that your legs touched the edge of the bathtub when you sat on the toilet. A garage stuffed with car parts, bags of beer cans that her father never took to the recycling center, the hole in the plasterboard wall of the living room through which you could see the bare two-by-fours, the carpet that looked like the fur of a worn-out stuffed animal. Some stairs led up to an attic, where the girls, Lucy and Patricia, had their beds. The ceiling of the bedroom was the roof, which slanted sharply over them while they slept. If George Orson had seen it, she imagined, he would have been embarrassed for her; she would have felt dirty.

Though—she couldn't say that she was particularly happy to be *here*, either.

In the middle of the night, she found herself wide awake. They were in the old bed of George Orson's parents, a king-size expanse, and she was aware of the other rooms in the house—the other empty bedrooms on the second floor, the trickle of a pipe in the bathroom, the toothy row

of bookshelves in the “library,” the flutter of birds in the dead trees of the high-fenced backyard. A “Japanese garden,” George Orson called it. She could picture the small wooden bridge, the bed of stunted, un-flowering irises choked with weeds. A miniature weeping cherry tree, still bare and alive. A granite Kotoji lantern statue. George Orson’s mother had had an “artistic bent,” he’d told Lucy.

By which he meant, Lucy assumed, that his mother had been a little crazy. Or so Lucy gathered. The place—the motel and the house—seemed as if it had been put together by someone with multiple personality disorder. A lighthouse. A Japanese garden. The living room with its gruesome old sheet-covered upholstery, and the room with the television and the big picture window that looked out onto the backyard. The kitchen with its 1970s colors, the avocado-green stove and refrigerator, the mustard-colored tile floor, drawers and cabinets full of dishes and utensils, an old wooden butcher block and an almost obscenely large collection of knives—George Orson’s mother had apparently been obsessed with them, since they could be found in almost every shape and length a person could imagine, from tiny filet blades to enormous cleavers. Very disturbing, thought Lucy. In a pantry, she found three boxes of china dishes and some disturbing canning jars, still full of dark goop.

On the second floor, there was the bathroom and three bedrooms, including this one she was in right now, the very room, the very bed where his parents had slept, where his elderly mother had continued to sleep, Lucy imagined, after the husband had died. Even now, many years later, there was still a vague hint of old-lady powder about it. A few hangers still in the closet, and the empty dresser sitting darkly against the wall, and then the stairs that led up to the third floor—to the turret, a small octagon-shaped room with a single window, which looked out away from the lake out onto the cone of the faux lighthouse, and the courtyard of motel rooms. And the highway. And the alfalfa fields. And the far distant horizon.

And so—she couldn’t help it, she couldn’t sleep, and she lay there staring up at the swimming darkness that her brain couldn’t quite process. The door was closed, the window shade was pulled, so there wasn’t even moonlight or stars.

Suggestions of shapes floated across the surface of the dark like protozoa seen through a microscope, but there wasn’t too much for the optic mechanisms to actually hold on to.

She slid her hand beneath the covers until she came up against the shoreline of George Orson’s body. His shoulder, his chest, the ribs rising and falling underneath his skin, his warm belly, which she pressed against—until at last he turned over and put his arm over her, and she felt her way along the length of it until she found his wrist, his hand, his pinkie finger. Which she held.

Okay.

Everything would be fine, she thought.

At the very least, she wasn’t in Pompey any longer.

Miles's twin brother, Hayden, had been missing for more than ten years, though probably "missing" wasn't exactly the right word.

"At large"? Was that a better term?

When the most recent letter from Hayden arrived, Miles had pretty much decided that it was time to give up. He was thirty-one years old—they were both thirty-one years old—and it was time, Miles thought, to let go. To move on. So much energy and effort, he thought, squandered and pointless. For a while Miles felt a new determination: he was going to live his own life.

He was back again in Cleveland, where he and Hayden had grown up. He had an apartment on Euclid Heights Boulevard, not far from their old house, and a job managing a store called Matalov Novelties, an old storefront mail-order establishment on Prospect Avenue that dealt primarily in magicians' equipment—flash paper and smoke powder, scarves and ropes, trick cards and coins and top hats and so forth, though they also sold joke gifts and gags, useless gadgets, risqué toys, some sex stuff. The catalog was somewhat unfocused, but he liked that. If he could organize it, he thought.

Was it what he had hoped to do with his life? Probably not exactly, but he had a good brain for receipts and orders, and he felt a certain affection for the stock on the shelves, the carnival air of the trashy occult and bright plastic legerdemain. There were times, sitting at the computer in the dim windowless back room, when he thought it wouldn't be a bad career after all. He had grown fond of the old proprietress, Mrs. Matalov, who had been a magician's assistant back in the 1930s, and who now, even at ninety-three, had the stoic dignity of a beautiful woman who was about to be cut in half. He had a good rapport with Mrs. Matalov's granddaughter, Aviva, a sarcastic young woman with dyed black hair and black fingernails and a narrow, sorrowful face, whom Miles had begun to imagine he could probably ask out on a date.

He had been thinking about going back to college, maybe getting a degree in business. Also, possibly, getting some short-term cognitive therapy.

So when Hayden's letter arrived, Miles was surprised at how quickly he had fallen back into his old ways. He shouldn't have even opened the letter, he thought later. And in fact, when he came home to his apartment building that day in June and opened the mail cubbyhole and saw it there among the bills and flyers—he actually decided that he should leave it unopened. *Set it aside*, he thought. *Let it rest for a while before you look at it.*

But no, no. By the time he had gone up the three flights of stairs to his apartment, he had already torn open the seal and unfolded the letter.

My Dear Miles, it said.

Miles! My brother, my best beloved, my only true friend, I'm sorry that I have been out of touch for so long. I hope you don't hate me. I can only pray that you understand the grave situation I have found myself in since we last spoke. I have been in deep hiding, very deep, but every day I thought about how much I missed you. It was only my fear for your own safety that kept me from contact. I am fairly certain that your phone lines and email have been contaminated, and in fact even this letter is a great risk. You should be aware that someone may be watching you, and I hate to say this but I think you may actually be in danger. Oh, Miles, I wanted to leave you alone. I know that you are tired of all of this and you want to live your own life, and you deserve that. I'm so sorry. I wanted to give you the gift of being free of me, but unfortunately they know we are connected. I have just lost someone very dear to me, due to my own carelessness, and now my thoughts turn to you with great concern. Please be wary, Miles. Beware of the police, and any government official, FBI, CIA, even local government. Do not have any contact with H&R Block or with anyone representing J.P. Morgan, Morgan Stanley, Goldman Sachs, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, Chase, or Citigroup. Avoid anyone associated with Yale University. Also, I know that you have been in contact with the Matalov family in Cleveland, and all I can tell you is DO NOT TRUST THEM! Do not tell anyone about this letter! I hate to put you in an awkward position, but I urge you to get out of Cleveland as soon as possible, as quietly as possible. Miles, I am so sorry to have involved you in all this, I truly am. I wish I could go back and do things differently, that I could have been a better brother to you. But that chance is gone now, I know, and I fear that I won't be in this world much longer. Do you remember the Great Tower of Kallupilluk? That may be my final resting place, Miles. You may never hear from me again.

*I am, as always, yours, your one true brother,
and I love you so much.*

Hayden

So.

What does a person do with a letter such as this? Miles sat there for a while at the kitchen table, with the letter spread out in front of him, and opened a packet of artificial sweetener into his cup of tea. *What would a normal person do?* he wondered. He imagined the normal person reading the letter and shaking his head sadly. *What could be done?* the normal person would do for himself.

He looked at the postmark on the envelope: *Inuvik, NT, CANADA X0E 0T0.*

"I'm going to have to take some personal time, unfortunately," Miles told Mrs. Matalov the next morning, and he sat there with the phone pressed to his ear, listening to her silence.

"Personal time?" said Mrs. Matalov, in her old-fashioned vampire accent. "I don't understand. What does this mean, personal time?"

"I don't know," he said. "Two weeks?" He looked at the itinerary he had planned out on the computer, the map of Canada with a green highlighter mark running a jagged, rivering way across the country. Four thousand miles, which would take, he calculated, approximately eighty-four hours. If he drove fifteen or sixteen hours a day, he could be in Inuvik by the weekend. It might

be difficult, he thought, but then again didn't truck drivers do it all the time? Weren't they always making marathon drives such as this? "Well," he said. "Maybe three weeks."

"Three weeks!" Mrs. Matalov said.

"I'm really super sorry about this," Miles said. "It's just that—something urgent has come up. He cleared his throat. "A private matter," he said. *Do not trust the Matalov family*, Hayden had said, which was crazy, but Miles felt himself pause.

"It's complicated," he said.

Which it was. Even if he were to be completely honest, what would he say? How could he even explain the ease with which these old longings had come back to him, the lingering ache of love and duty? Perhaps to a therapist it would seem simply compulsive—after all this time, after all the years that he had already wasted—but here, nevertheless, came that same urgency he'd felt when Hayden had first run away from home all those years ago. That same certainty that he could find him, catch him, help him, or at least get him locked up somewhere safe. How could he explain how badly he wanted this? Who would understand that when Hayden left, it was as if a part of himself had vanished in the middle of the night—his right hand, his eyes, his heart—like the Gingerbread Man in the fairy tale, running away down the road: *Come back! Come back!* If he were to tell this to someone, he would seem as crazy as Hayden himself.

He had thought that he was past such feelings, but, well. Here he was. Packing his things. Taking the milk out of his refrigerator and pouring it down the drain. Sifting through his old notes, printing out long-ago emails that Hayden had sent him—the various hints and clues of his whereabouts dropped into fantastical descriptions of invented landscapes, the angry rants about human overpopulation and the international banking conspiracy, the late-night suicidal regrets. And then Miles sat at his desk examining with a magnifying glass the envelope of the letter that Hayden had just sent him, that postmark, that postmark. Rechecking the directions. He knew where Hayden was going.

And now he was almost there.

Miles sat in his car by the side of the road, casually reading through one of Hayden's journals as he waited for the ferry that would take him across the Mackenzie River. Some rails ran up from the slate-gray muddy bank and into the green wrinkled lobes of tundra, but otherwise there wasn't much sign of human habitation. A toilet house. A diamond-shaped road sign. The river was a calm reflective surface, silver and sapphire blue. Once he was across, it was only about eighty miles to Inuvik.

Inuvik was one of the places Hayden had gotten fixated on. "Spirit cities," he called them, and he had written extensively about Inuvik, among other places, in the journals and notebooks that Miles now had in his possession. For years now, Hayden had been taken with the idea that Inuvik was the site of a great archaeological ruin, that on the edge of Inuvik was the remnants of the Great Tower of Kallupilluk, which had been a spire of ice and stone, approximately forty stories tall, built around 290 B.C. at the behest of the mighty Inuit emperor, Kallupilluk—a figure whom Hayden believed he had contacted once in a past life.

None of this was true, of course. Very few of the things Hayden was obsessed with had much basis in reality, and in the last few years he had strayed even further into a mostly imaginary world. In actuality, there had never been a tower or a great Inuit emperor named Kallupilluk. In real life, Inuvik was a small town in the Northwest Territories of Canada with a population of

around thirty-five hundred people. It was located on the Mackenzie Delta—"nested," according to the town's website, "between the treeless tundra and the northern boreal forest," and it had existed for less than a century. It had been constructed building by building by the Canadian government as an administrative center in the western Arctic, incorporated at last as a village in 1967. It wasn't even, as Hayden seemed to believe, on the shores of the Arctic Ocean.

Nevertheless, Miles couldn't help but think of Hayden's drawings of that great tower, the simple but vivid pencil sketch Hayden had done, reminiscent of the Porcelain Tower of Nanjing, and he felt a small, dizzy quiver of anticipation pass through him as the Mackenzie River ferry appeared on the horizon, approaching. Miles had spent a good portion of his life poring over Hayden's various journals and notebooks, and even longer living with Hayden's various delusions. Despite everything, there remained a tiny core of credulity that glowed a little brighter as he came closer to the town of Hayden's fantasies. He could almost picture the place at the edge of the town where the Great Tower once rose up out of the folds of tundra, stark against the wide, endlessly shining sky.

This had always been one of the problems: this was maybe one way to explain it. For years and years and years, Miles had been a willing participant in his twin brother's fantasies. Folie à deux was that what they called it?

Since their childhood, Hayden had been a great believer in the mysteries of the unknown—psychic phenomenon, past lives, UFOs, ley lines and spirit paths, astrology and numerology, etc. etc. And Miles was his biggest follower and supporter. His listener. He had never personally believed in such stuff—not in the way that Hayden appeared to—but there had been a time when he had been happy to play along, and perhaps for a while this alternate world had been a shared part of their brains. A dream they'd both been having together.

Years later when he came into possession of Hayden's papers and journals, Miles was aware that he was probably the only person in the world capable of translating and understanding what Hayden had written. He was the only one who could make sense of those stacks of composition notebooks—that tiny block-letter handwriting; the text and calculations that ran from edge to edge and top to bottom of each page; the manila envelopes full of drawings and doctor's photographs; the maps Hayden had torn out of encyclopedias and covered with his geodetic projections; the lines across North America that converged at places like Winnemucca, Nevada, and Kulm, North Dakota, and Inuvik in the Northwest Territories; the theories, increasingly serpentine and involuted, a hodgepodge of crypto-archaeology and numerology, holomorphy and brane cosmology, past-life regression and conspiracy theory paranoia.

My work, as Hayden had at some point begun to call it.

Miles often tried to remember when Hayden first began to use that term: "My work." At first it had just been a game the two of them were playing—and Miles even remembered the day they had started. It was the summer that they turned twelve, and the two of them had been poring over books by Tolkien and Lovecraft. Miles had been particularly fond of the maps that were included in the novels of *The Lord of the Rings*, while Hayden had been more inclined toward the mythologies and mysterious places in Lovecraft—the alien city beneath the Antarctic Mountains, the prehistoric cyclopean cities, the accursed New England towns.

They had found one of those old gold-leaf hard-bound atlases, 25 × 20, on the shelf in the

living room with the *World Book Encyclopedia*, and they had loved the feel of it, the sheen and weight, which made it feel like it could be some ancient tome. It had been Miles's idea that they could take some of the maps of North America and turn them into fantasy worlds. Dwarf cities in the mountains. Scorched goblin ruins on the plains. They could invent landmarks and historical events and battles and pretend that in the olden days, before the Indians, America had been a realm of great cities and magical elder races. Miles thought it would be fun to make up their own Dungeons and Dragons game with real places and fantasy places intermingled; he had some very specific ideas about how this would develop, but Hayden was already bending over the map with a black ink pen. "Here is where some pyramids are," Hayden said, pointing to North Dakota, and Miles watched as he drew three triangles, right there on the page of the atlas. In ink!

"Hayden!" Miles said. "We can't erase that. We're going to get in trouble."

"No, no," Hayden said coolly. "Don't be a fag. We'll just hide it."

And this was one of those early secrets that they had—the old atlas hidden beneath a stack of board games on a shelf in their bedroom closet.

Miles still had the old atlas, and as he waited there at the edge of the river for the ferry to come, he took it out and paged through it once again. There, on the northern coast of Canada, was the tower that Hayden had drawn, and Miles's own clumsy attempt at calligraphy: THE IMPATRABLE TOWER OF THE DARK KING!

How ridiculous, he thought. How depressing—that he should still be following the lead of his twelve-year-old self—an adult man! Over the years that he had been looking for Hayden, he had often thought about trying to explain his situation. To the authorities, for example, or to psychiatrists. To people he had become friends with, to girls he had liked. But he always found himself hesitating at the last minute. The details seemed so silly, so unreal and artificial. How could anyone actually believe in such stuff?

"My brother is very troubled." That was all he ever managed to tell people. "He's very—i.e. Mentally ill." He didn't know what else could be said.

When Hayden first started to exhibit symptoms of schizophrenia, back when they were in middle school, Miles didn't really believe it. It was a put-on, he thought. A prank. It was like the time when that quack guidance counselor decided Hayden was a "genius." Hayden had thought that was hilarious.

"Geeenious," he said, drawing the word out in a dreamy, mocking way. This was at the beginning of seventh grade, and it was late at night, they were in their bunk beds in their room, and Hayden's voice wafted down through the darkness from the top bunk. "Hey, Miles," he said in that flat, amused voice he had. "Miles, how come I'm a genius and you're not?"

"I don't know," Miles said. He was nonplussed, perhaps a bit hurt by the whole thing, but he just turned his face against his pillow. "It doesn't matter that much to me," he said.

"But we're identical," Hayden said. "We have the *exact* same DNA. So how can it even be possible?"

"It's not genetic, I guess," Miles had said, glumly, and Hayden had laughed.

"Maybe I'm just better at fooling people than you are," he said. "The whole idea of IQ is a joke. Did you ever think about that?"

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