

"The product of a whirring intellect with brilliance to burn. . . . Like watching a mad genius at work in his laboratory, conjuring the magnificent and the monstrous into life." —ANTHONY MARRA, *NEW YORK TIMES*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE TSAR OF LOVE AND TECHNO*

# PRIVATE CITIZENS

TONY TULATHIMUTTE

# A NOVEL



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# PRIVATE CITIZENS

TONY TULATHIMUTTE

*wm*

WILLIAM MORROW

*An Imprint of HarperCollinsPublishers*



# ***Dedication***

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*For my parents—  
back then, right this moment, and indefinitely*



## *Epigraph*

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*In respect that it is solitary, I  
like it very well; but in respect that it is  
private, it is a very vile life.*

—Touchstone, *As You Like It*, act 3, scene 2

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# Prologue

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September 2007

They were on a day trip, a nothing, the four of them in the hot car speeding north. All the passing and now-passed road looked faint through the filthy windows, which threw dull light onto their laps. It was ten A.M., any promise of an early start already squandered, and look, peach weather. In Sunday traffic it would be another fifty minutes, sitting still, rushing forward, all facing the same way. A fleck of fuzz stuck in Linda's eyelashes. The searing of leatherette in succulent air, a baguette rebaking in its paper sleeve, green grapes beginning to wrinkle, disks of lemon browning in iced tea. Nobody was getting enough sleep. They drove on to light and green water, sun, rest, afternoon. Last weekend before fall.

So then what? Why, Linda thought, of every possible experience, the beach? It was a failure of the imagination, budgeted and scheduled. They'd get there, trek miles down the shore until Cory deemed a spot quiet enough to lay their towels, even though by noon it would be as crowded as anywhere else. They would lie still among pasty bodies and feel tired. Will would bitch about the glare on his phone while everyone waited for him to sober up and drive them back home. And *nobody* had told her Henry would be here.

Linda picked at the white fray of her cutoffs. Already she missed New York—the city all other cities merely quoted, that tremendous vile heart pumping bedlam through its boroughs, whereas San Francisco was more uterine: passive, nonvital. Here the raindrops were smaller, the hustle slower, everything tolerated. And cities that tolerated everything tolerated mediocrity.

Which was why, unlike most Stanford grads, who'd followed the pollinating winds to San Francisco or Mountain View after graduating, she'd moved to New York, where she'd worked as an independent dominatrix, slapping, berating, and denying orgasm to bankers five hours a week. Afternoons she'd spent swatting cigarette ash off books, and at night she'd gone to parties, where her Stanford Domme shtick gave her cred for a checkered past she didn't have: what was really checkered was her future. Her tattoo sleeves had vined out and joined between her shoulder blades, her hair went whitely afloat with bleaching, her voice turned permanently hoarse. Two years of bars and show dancing and reading. A bright catwalk of youth.

Then, without really meaning to, she'd stolen a miniature steel sculpture from a group show her roommates were hosting in their apartment, and was blamed for it, even though nobody could prove anything and she didn't even remember taking it. She was kicked out, and then for a few weeks she'd gone a little too hard; sure, she'd made some other friends, who were more cool than interesting. So after she'd gone to the ER for a hemorrhaged septum, her mom had tried forcing her into rehab and she'd indignantly refused until she realized that it'd be hilarious, actually.

With begrudging pledges from each of her separated parents, she'd checked into a recovery center on some forested acreage in Santa Cruz. The idea at first was to see how many people she could alienate as quickly as possible—during the icebreaker, when she was asked to name her favorite book and describe her worst date, she'd said, *I guess my worst date was the time I was raped. Oh, and my favorite book is Moby-Dick.* But when she realized that rehab counselors saw this sort of snide pushback all the time, she decided not to resist, but to cooperate. In dryout couture (hoodie, ball cap, big sunglasses), she eased into a calm routine, reading until noon, affirmations after lunch, Bikram

yoga, dishwashing, and nightly group discussion. She felt gratified to be the youngest resident by far and embraced the gooey recovery bromides with perfected camp. When a starved-eyed oxycodone addict testified about seeing the afterlife during his overdose, Linda described her own bodily ascent to heaven on the backs of two angels. At group prayer, she seized people's shoulders and babbled in tongues. *You've come so far on your journey*, her counselor told her at the end of the month.

It was a pretty decent story, and more or less true. But when she'd told it to her friends just now everyone was silent except for Cory, who'd only said, *Jesus, Linda*.

She wasn't trying to impress them or anything, she was just trying to make this whole trip less boring. Seeing her college friends after two years made her sad. It was clear now that they'd all avoided experiences, capitulated on their desires, afraid of disturbing their little routines. Linda had always had older friends, since she'd skipped two grades, and though she'd just turned twenty-one, really she'd been twenty-one since she was fourteen. But her friends were in such a weird hurry to turn thirty—not older, just *old*. When she'd moved here a few months ago, she'd thought Will and Cory would show her around, but she'd had to drag *them* to parties instead, where they'd form a sullen huddle and complain about how loud the music was, until either they left or Linda ditched them. It was super inconvenient, since by two A.M. she'd need a place to crash—she hadn't yet told them she was technically homeless—and she'd have to go home with some desperate creeper.

*We could be doing something fun!* Linda thought. *One day we'll be dead! So why this?* She wished they'd at least do drugs. That would make them interesting. Auden had his bennies, Milton his opiates, Huxley acid, Baudelaire weed, Freud coke, Balzac fifty coffees a day—and Linda did *all* of those, plus Xanax. Even hangovers were good, sipping Bloody Marys alone in a dive bar, the slow crawl back to sentience feeling almost like accomplishment. Ugh, but there was her problem, *accomplishments*. She wasn't totally convinced that her current experience jihad was useful for her writing, and she *wanted* to be convinced. Of course, eventually *party* had to deflate from verb to noun, but there was no renouncing indulgences you hadn't exhausted.

She hadn't written, much less published, anything since college, and for this she partly blamed San Francisco, this little ukulele-strumming cuddle party. A They Might Be Giants song set in concrete. Its last influential artists were the godawful Beats, and now it was nothing but a collapsed soufflé of sex kitsch and performance readings, book clubs, writing workshops. Haight-Ashbury radicalism had been flushed out in a thunderous enema of tourist cash; the Mission was annexed by Silicon Valley. City Lights was a good name for something that obscured stars. The little journals and bookstores were on a drip-feed of pledge drives, and the only thing to say about the McSweeney's tweehouse interns was that they had nice packaging.

What was she even doing in this car? Why reaffirm dead friendships when she could be writing, at least thinking about writing, instead of thinking of not thinking about it? She pinched two Xanax from her coin pocket and dry-swallowed them behind a fake yawn, put on her sunglasses, and rolled down the passenger's-side window to smoke as they passed through the northern terminus of Highway 1, where the street grid unraveled.

THE LOUD INRUSH of air flapped through the open window into the backseat, cutting into Cory's reverie about how to talk about the upcoming municipal elections. It was San Francisco's first instant-runoff mayoral vote, and emissions regulation and library fund renewal were on the ballot—but when she casually mentioned this a few minutes ago, Will said he didn't know there *was* an election this year and Linda hadn't even registered to vote, and Henrik was asleep. They'd tuned her out, because political engagement somehow made you a boring caricature of the earnest liberal. She knew she

risked coming off as a judgy proselytizing nag, but if she didn't bother them like this, they wouldn't be aware at *all*.

Usually she'd disguise her rants by talking about her job as an event promoter for a nonprofit. Socialize. They threw fundraising events for good causes, hiring local bands and drag queens to perform at their rallies, events that were totally every bit as good as Linda's stupid parties. Though yes, throwing parties for money was somewhat cynical, and presumed that young people cared about progress only insofar as they could still have fun. Did people think it was enough to "be liberal"? To feel bad but do nothing? That was of a piece with America's double exceptionalism: how you judge your nation as the most godblessed or goddamned on earth, but also stood apart from it. The boomer politic had become so fat, so lumpen, that it needed morality *incentivized*.

The wind battered Cory's hair around, and she held it out of her face, lamenting its impossible tangles, not dreadlocks exactly—more like anxietylocks, kelpy and worry-wadded. How could her friends know what it was like to stand on a corner, asking strangers to spend ten minutes and a few bucks on political issues that affected everyone, and getting *eye-rolled* for it? All the wave-aside from finance dicks and stroller moms, all the goddamn white earbuds that let people pretend they couldn't see or hear you, making her feel like equal parts panhandler, streetwalker, and soapbox preacher. Every weekend for two years she'd been schlepping around in her orange company T-shirt and fanny pack in Dolores Park, wiping her sideburns of sweat before delivering her rap to young people languishing on blankets: *Hey guys! What're you doing this Saturday? [Beat] Cool! Well after that, you should totally come out to [EVENT], [LOCAL ACT] is headlining, [LOCAL DJ] is spinning, it's going to be rad. Eighteen bucks at the door, and half goes to [CAUSE]. Hope I see you there. Peace out!*

At best they'd nod at her with closed-mouth smiles, taking a flyer without looking at it. And the worst? Well, she'd gotten spit on by a pro-lifer once, but that was actually validating; the worst was when, after she'd canvassed a birthday picnic, a drunk girl ran up and kicked Cory in the ass so hard her sandal came off, and the whole party laughed through their beer and smokes, knowing that Cory was professionally handcuffed to politeness, fucking *hipsters*.

For all the debasement, though, she never felt like the job was beneath her—activism was all about responsible cringing. But why the *hostility*? Sure, canvassing was cheesy and irritating and a far cry from revolution, but it wasn't lazy fatalism either. Her hair and clothes probably alienated people, but wasn't she basically like them? Didn't she work on cool projects, ride a bike, smoke weed like everyone else? . . . Yes, in fact, her event turnout had only appreciably improved once she'd started attaching little joints to her flyers. She couldn't afford much weed, so she cut them with Italian seasoning, and she streamlined her rap: *[Offer flyer] Party Saturday. [Leave] For that, Cory was promoted from promoter to outreach manager, and all at once she was proud of her cleverness, relieved that the company was solvent, and furiously disappointed in humanity.*

Will's swervy driving and the exhaust blowing through Linda's window were making Cory ill. She asked Linda to roll it up, and Linda complied with annoying slowness. Cory had assumed her friends would go on to redeem their privilege after graduating; instead they'd disappeared up their own asses. Will was some Internet douchebag, and Linda was back to getting shitfaced and thizzed and dropping out only weeks out of rehab. Undergrad Linda, her tea-drinking, Deleuze-reading, sweatpants-wearing college roommate, was now buried under a landfill of affectations: that wifebeater with the bra showing through the armholes and Day-Glo satin headband, all inked up like some community mural, high-waisted shorts like denim diapers. It was so depressing when women depoliticized themselves with hotpants.

Henrik, though, napping beside Cory? He was nice, considerate, sincere, even sexy in his big-be way, and he'd never oppress you with narcissistic drama. Though in college, he'd decided to da Linda. He was a man; men liked Linda. Anyway, even niceness wasn't enough. *Nice*: from *nescire*, not know. People *should* know! They *knew* they should know, and didn't! It was one thing to try inform annoyed pedestrians about marriage equality, prison reform, the Ellis Act, minimum wage—but her *friends*? They'd all agree war sucks, Bush is evil, whatever, but try getting them to canva their own goddamn corner on a Saturday afternoon.

Cory had nothing against leisure per se—she'd taken the job at Socialize precisely because seemed to reconcile fun with purpose, but the company's struggles only seemed to demonstrate th the two canceled each other out. Her generation's failure was not of comprehension but of compassion, of splitting the indifference; its juvenile taste for making a mess; its indignant reluctance to clean it up; its limitless capacity for giving itself a break; its tendency to understand its privilege as vindication. And they weren't even happy.

Some people did care, though. Like her boss, Taren: compassionate, hardworking, a bit out of touch, but never alienated by conviction. Cory could do the easy thing and hang out only with people with matching political tastes, but she didn't want to give up on her friends like she had on her father—an objectively evil libertarian, who, after Cory had gone vegetarian in eighth grade, had snuck animal products into her food, not out of misplaced concern, just for brute enforcement of status quo—he'd laughed as he told her. (Cory had gone to the bathroom and made herself retch loud enough for everyone at the dinner table to hear, and then refused to eat for days until her father made vaguely credible threats about nose tubes.)

Dating was no easier. She always got dumped for precisely her best qualities—dedication and intensity. Like when she'd skipped her own lunches to deliver surprise sandwiches to her last boyfriend's office and he said she was smothering him. She wanted to try dating women, but she didn't have time to figure out the Bay Area dyke scene, which was cool but sort of cliquy and unmannered. She hated thinking that moral purpose asphyxiated relationships, but there it was.

Maybe she was wasting her effort on these particular friends, but you had to involve people even when they weren't grateful, even if you had to provoke and repeat, glaze the message, glaze it with irony. It might annoy everyone, but if she tried and they couldn't be bothered to care, then they'd at least have earned their damned futures and deserved to be lost.

ALL MORNING WILL had been irradiating the car with silent rage. He was unaware of how violently he was driving, and of the seat belt chime that had been dinging the whole ride because he refused to buckle up. He felt his brain turning red. Vanya should have been sitting next to him in the passenger seat, right where Linda was sitting, but they'd spent all morning fighting. This trip was supposed to be his birthday celebration, which they'd already postponed for weeks now, and she'd promised *for days* that she'd come to the beach *even if* her boss called. Ellen, Vanya's boss, had texted Vanya literally an hour ago to be in at the office pronto, and when Vanya said yes, Will said he *knew* Ellen would put up with this shit, and Vanya replied: "Baby, here's an idea: go without me! You haven't seen your friends in a while, forever! Do you want us to turn into one of those conjoined-twin couples who do everything together?"

Not much Will could say to that—because that was *exactly* what he wanted, but admitting that would look needy. What if he'd manned up and stood his ground? *Vanya, a promise is a promise, so go get your fucking towel*. No, he'd just send her rolling into the arms of one of those white techbro jags who were always leaving flirty comments on her Facebook and demoing their beta apps for her

parties while Will stood by flexing a red cup in his hand.

But he wasn't competing with other guys so much as with Vanya's entire life. She'd recently gotten the startup itch, and every hour she spent on biz dev webinars and skillsharing brown-bags was an hour stolen from Will. It was tough to say whether he resented the richness of her life or the blandness of his own: day drinking, blog reading, working from home with no ambitions to speak of except Vanya herself. She'd never scale back. After a year together, though, how much alone time was she strictly entitled to? True, Vanya gave Will an equally long leash, but that wasn't fair, because all he wanted to do with his free time was spend it with her.

So he'd said, fine, if you'd rather work than come along like you *said* you would, that's on you. And now he was on this stupid trip, which was her idea in the first place, out of sheer spite. It was easy to imagine another twenty-four years passing before he met a girl of Vanya's caliber, one who was moreover willing to date a short Asian guy. Before Vanya, it'd been a pathetic year of scurrying from bars to parties, getting stood up and shot down, girl after girl backing away in exotic fighting stances. And before that, twenty-two years of virginity. People assumed that longtime celibacy lowered your standards, but really it made you crazy to prove that you wouldn't settle for anything less than what was supposedly out of your league, which really fucked with your whole concept of the attainable.

He'd met Vanya at a house party last summer, when he saw her sitting alone in the corner of the living room, texting while people were dancing. He'd been too drunk on Fernet to be properly intimidated, and he'd approached her and said something like, *I bet you're a better dancer than Michael Jordan*. She laughed, and he said, *Whoa, I can see all your teeth and they're all great*, and then he made the best and least deliberate move of his life, to just assault her with a kiss. And she kissed back! And then, when Will took her hand to lead her somewhere private, she didn't get up, but instead hung on and . . . rolled. He'd been so drunk he hadn't noticed she was paraplegic. *Perfect*.

But dating her had started to feel like paying the upkeep on a prize Lamborghini. Now he had to do things like clean his room or select clothes with attention to fabrics and seasonal palette. And smoke less. Or not really less but faster. What else could he offer? Money. He could fix her computer. And he could make her laugh by showing her his fat-kid pictures and imitating the way his mom said the word *regular*, even though he himself didn't find it funny—actually it was bound up in his whole complicated deal about Asianness.

So it was almost too bad that Vanya was *worth* the effort, surpassing every unrealistic standard that his friends had always insultingly urged him to lay aside. She was this outrageous cliché of sexiness, fashionable in wheelchair-tailored couture, in stilettos that added no height. With her bangs and faint overbite and humongous eyes, she was cute, and cute was more endearing than hot. And she was also hot. Vindicatingly. And—not that he ever bragged about this, not that he'd ever imply that this was her best quality—but in bed she was *incredibly disgusting*, indulging every tacky male fantasy, a blitzkrieg of clever fingers and smothering tits. She did everything that was too good to ask for.

The bridge yielded to highway. Will's head rushed with dark blood; he realized he was holding his breath. Though he sort of always felt that way.

I think an apology—, he began to text. But he knew it'd make him seem petty, even though against the general current of his insecurity ran a riptide of vanity, insisting in its mirthless way that he *totally* deserved Vanya; that if anything, everyone was unworthy of *him*, they just didn't know it. Will would always be the hungrier one in the relationship, a fact just shy of open acknowledgment ever since she'd caught him merging their photos together with face-morphing software to see what their kid would look like. Bottom line, he'd gotten a girl he couldn't have, one who, by some divine

clerical error, precariously tolerated him. He was desiring beyond his means.

A shriek from the backseat pulled Will's attention back into the world. "~~What, Cory?~~"

"That guy on your left! You almost—Will, are you *texting while driving*? You *are*! Pull over!"

"Calm down. I'm touch-typing."

"Will, at least put away—"

"Yo, can I *drive*?"

He'd forgotten about Cory's control issues. Back when he'd helped her move to the city two years ago, she'd made him drive at fifty miles an hour the whole way to minimize fuel consumption. At that lofty lefty grandstanding, and here she was, insinuating he was a bad driver. He shouldn't have invited her, especially since she'd brought Linda without telling him—though he supposed he hadn't warned her Henrik would be here either.

If it came down to picking between friends like Cory, who bossed him around and only hung out when it was convenient for them or when he could do them a favor, or Vanya, who bossed him around but also fucked him, the choice was easy. If Vanya moved in with him, he'd ditch everyone else posthaste, and things would be fine, or at least it'd be harder for her to dump him on a whim. That was all he wanted.

THE CAR RECKONED down the narrowing road curving around the headlands, almost there. A tight turn caused the plastic binder to slide off Henrik's lap onto his feet, waking him. He'd wrenched his neck sleeping with his head drooped over his seat belt sash. The stitches in his tongue ached and pulsed. With sticky eyes, he glanced at Cory, who poked his nose. The ocean roiled glamorously to his left, making emblems of light jiggle on the car's ceiling. The heat itched on his face and his need to fart had a medical direness to it—possibly IBS, ulcerative colitis, Crohn's, polyps. Or death. Yeah, chronic death; death not otherwise specified.

He wished he hadn't agreed to come. Even if they made good time heading back, he'd still spend all night at the finite element analysis workstation, eating dinner from a vending machine, wiping himself down in the bathroom. And when he finally got to bed he'd still have to worry about a repeat of last night, when he'd bitten his tongue in his sleep. (A nerve-rich sense organ right between the sharpest, hardest bones powered by the strongest muscles: There was your antiteleological argument. Or evidence of Stupid Design.) He'd gone to the ER, but downplayed the pain to his doctor and was discharged with nothing but some stitches and a wad of medicated gauze to hold in his mouth. And when Will and Cory came to pick him up from the Caltrain station he'd downplayed it again, keeping his mouth closed without explaining why, and Cory had just laughed and said, *Oookay, Henrik's being weird again*, in that way people tended to talk about him behind his back right to his face.

At Stanford there was this smug saying that the students were like ducks: tranquil on the surface but paddling furiously to keep afloat. By reputation Henrik was all upper-duck: a round, approachable Danish face creased with smile lines, blond beard, huggable flannel, curly hair that was tidy only when wet. He was shy but could do eye contact. People seemed to like him when he drank, so he drank. Last time he'd been out with Will, he'd spent his rent money on rounds for the bar and done a tequila shot through his nose.

But lately he was all lower-duck, a pair of thrashing webbed feet. Effexor had not made things better and Celexa made things worse, so he was on washout, which felt like a permanent caffeine crash. Last month he'd had his Depakote upped again, bloating his face and torso, while the Topamax made his arms bony, which seemed impossible, though if you could be manic and depressive, you could probably also be fat and emaciated. He would get better if it killed him.

The pill fog had stalled his dissertation project, modeling how dermal tissues separated under various mechanical stresses. Instead he spent his time wondering whether his sink sponge was flannelly enough to throw out, whether that new freckle on his finger was lethal, and whether it was sadder to eat six boiled frozen potstickers off his cutting board or to spend a whole hour cooking and eating a proper meal while staring at his blank walls alone. It wasn't that he was falling through the cracks but that he *was* a crack, not crazy but *crazing* like a hunk of schist, full of faults and microvoids, tenuously intact.

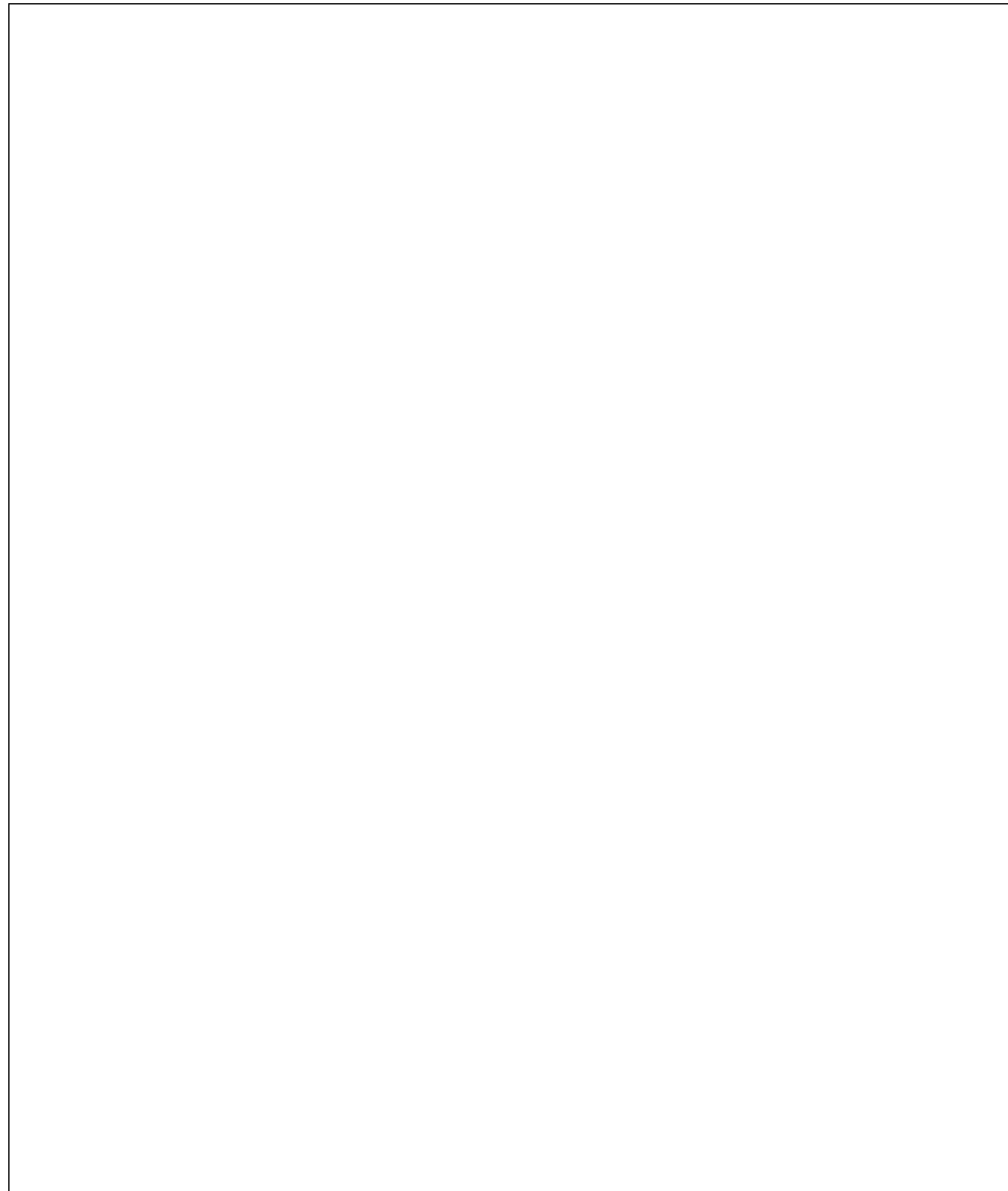
All his friends had become self-sufficient adults, and he'd bumbled back into the incubator. He couldn't blame them for not wanting to visit him on campus—happy hour, wine and cheese, trivia night, undergrad parties, no sir. Instead he ate Ruffles and returned Criterion Collection DVDs to the library unwatched, and took long walks for booze, single-handedly keeping the handles of Old Crow at the liquor store from acquiring that sticky layer of inventory dust. Sometimes when he passed by the Asian massage parlor on El Camino, he thought he might try to defibrillate his libido, but when he thought about it—entering some converted KFC and pantomiming with a baggy-eyed Filipina until she lifted his white modesty towel to give him a calloused handjob—shit, might as well just get an actual massage, his neck was *killing*. Not that he could afford either.

The seat belt had locked and was strangling him a bit. It was probably better now that he had a medical excuse to keep his mouth shut, because all he had to talk about was himself. He wanted to talk, but not as much as he didn't. His friends probably thought he was snubbing them, when really this was all he'd been looking forward to, and he kept his distance only because he didn't want to annoy them with his complaining. Why waste their time with self-pity? Especially with Linda here—he could see the flossy ruffle of her hair directly in front of him, through the gap in the headrest. She was blond now. Make a scene in front of her? No. Everyone had problems. Just put on some sunscreen and suck on that gauze, buddy. Keep living with chronic death. Soak that tongue in salt water.

By the time they pulled into the parking lot Henrik was asleep again, until Cory nudged his knee with hers. Daylight reddened through his eyelids. The sandy asphalt crackled beneath the grooves of Camry's tires as Will parked and cut the engine. Doors opened and the clammy scent of seawater blew through. Linda blocked her fluttering eyes against the sun, tried putting her sunglasses on before realizing they were on. Her palms numb from the car seat's vibration. Substances unpleasantly metabolized. Exhaling, Cory took Henrik's elbow and told him to leave his homework in the car. Bones reordered in backs, legs under shorts felt the breeze freshen their sweat. They walked on between the bollards and across the spilled edge of sand, through dune grass yielding ticklish underfoot. If Vanya had come they would be stopping here to collapse her wheelchair and carry her because she was still weak in that way, no matter what.

The coast, the endlessly rewinding spills of the tide, green curbs of seawater breaking into frothy white sizzling foam. The political vacuum of leisure spaces. Diagonals of sunlight carving off the last fragments of fog over the water. Didn't she have another pill? Smoking and talking with towels over their shoulders. Behind the others he spat out his gauze and kicked a wave of sand over it, following them to the concave shore. Towels down, snakes of sand filling the creases. A little crowded. But the weather. So nice. Days like this you have to have fun or you'll hate yourself when you're older.

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# *The Incorporation of Cordelia Rosen*

*It is necessary to remember that it is first the potential oppressor within that we must resist  
—the potential victim within that we must rescue.*

—bell hooks

### I. Live/Work

In October, Cory was promoted again, because her boss died.

Arriving at work early on Monday, Cory had found Taren Worth sleeping at his desk. He lay with his arms crossed at the wrists as if to ward off life's final beating. After Cory said *Good morning* to no reply, she assumed she'd caught him napping, and sat at her desk with minimal chair squeak. It wasn't until after the office manager, Martina, showed up, and after Cory made shushing gestures to keep her from waking Taren, and after Martina mouthed, *What smells like shit?*, and after the paramedics covered Taren's body while the police collected Martina's and Cory's trembling statements, and after Cory biked home, wept in the shower, smoked a bowl, and drank two glasses of chocolate almond milk, that she realized that she had no idea what to do when your boss died. Why didn't they teach it? You got math, you got sex ed—where was death ed?

Taren's timing was almost convenient: with three consecutive down quarters, Socialize was on the brink of default. For months they'd only been able to book bar venues with exposure-hungry local bands. The Oakland PD's cabaret permit sweeps were shuttering the East Bay venues, and San Francisco's dive bars were mutating into gastropubs and curio boutiques that thrived even as the economy withered. Taren had handled it with grim uncomplaining authority, and even though he'd been racking up overtime, nobody thought it'd *kill* him.

Her careworn boss. He was only thirty-four, but in hindsight he'd been a clear candidate for his version of death, with his asphalt complexion, dark purple nailbeds, drooping eye rims, a face creased like a palm. No matter his exhaustion, he always gave an unsmiling but sincere thumbs-up to Cory when she left the office. A light stutter made him seize up and squint like he was trying to read his own mind, and he'd say avuncular things like, *At this point the juice ain't worth the squeezing.*

Not knowing what else to do, the next day Cory returned to the office, a live/work loft in SOMA. The awareness that someone had died there made her sensitive to the exposed air ducts and furniture purchased from the liquidation sales of other offices. Taren's desk had been thrust aside by the paramedics, but its effects were intact, littered with consumerdrug: punctured blister packs, Dunhills, soft packs, stagnant coffees, tombstone-shaped nasal sprays, ibuprofen bottles with no caps.

Lacking the wherewithal to clean it up, Cory spent the day calling venues to suspend the ongoing projects. She tidied up, cleared the whiteboard, stocked the printer paper, then sketched hands and dresses on her notepad until she remembered to fetch the mail, where she came across a delivered packet marked ATTN: CORDELIA ROSEN.

Inside was a copy of Taren's will, addressed to Cory by Taren's ex-wife, without comment. It stipulated the terms of his disposal (by incineration), the disposal of his possessions (to Goodwill) and finally an alarming dearth of goodwill:

3.1. To Deborah Higgins, who in marriage and separation treated me with contempt, ingratitude, and sexual spite, I leave the inconvenience of my corpse: the burden of my funeral expenses and the execution of my will.

3.2 To my half brother Dick Macy (emphasis on HALF and DICK) I leave sincere wishes for a quick death pinned under your WaveRunner.

These were lifelong gales of resentment from the legal void, a petition to God for redress, current to two weeks. Taren had rarely discussed his home life; Cory'd figured he just had no time for personal bullshit. Her eye jumped from clause to clause, catching spurts of venom for his lawyer, for Socialize's landlord, for his therapist. She felt guilty for prying, but did he need the privacy anymore?

If Cory had known Taren was this lonely, she would've done . . . something. She could admit, now that it was too late and despite being a solid four on the Kinsey scale, that Taren was probably her ideal partner—noble, intelligent, Jewish. Naturally she'd love him—you couldn't get more unattainable than dead. The missed opportunities were coming to her now, all those late working nights, and the time they'd watched *Dark Days* on the meeting room projector. Or the last time they'd been alone, two weeks ago. They'd been doing routine overtime, circles of lamplight on each of the desks as the skylight darkened, the turntable playing Nina Simone. Taren was reclined foreshadowingly in his chair, stiff and diagonal, fingers latched across his stomach. "What's up?" Cory had asked.

"My daughter," Taren muttered.

Cory pushed her chair back, casters rolling mutely over the vinyl scuff mat, and waited for the confession. "I shouldn't dump this on you," he continued, both protesting and capitulating. Cory encouraged him with appropriate subordinate concern.

"One sad truth," Taren said, "is that I achieved my goals—sort of. Owning a nonprofit, bending the arc of capitalism toward justice. I wanted to see the final swing of the materialist dialectic. But I swung the wrong way. Confidentially, our nonprofit is a nonrevenue. Everything's so small. In activism, you know, scale matters; I'm not some sentimental jerk who thinks everything's worth it as long as I ease some collective guilt. I came up rough. I'm realistic."

Taren had grown up on the fifth floor of a public housing development in Denver, living out the usual hardscrabble urban latchkey narrative, with crucial mentors and social awakenings; at Berkeley he did coke and studied public pedagogy and community organizing theory, graduating in journalism at the exact moment that O. J. Simpson and Monica Lewinsky cratered his faith in news. His girlfriend, a development economics grad student, was abruptly deidealized by an unplanned pregnancy, and Taren married her in the same civic building where she would pauperize him six years later. He waited tables until his daughter was in preschool, then got hired at the Ad Council, where he coordinated billboards telling black people to get checked for lupus, gay men to quit meth and get tested, Chinese people to seek mental illness assistance, Latinos to curb their kids' TV watching, everyone to exercise. "I was the white colonialist coming down from the mountaintop to hang fifty-foot commandments for minorities. I might as well've been wearing a pith helmet and jodhpurs."

So Taren made a Hail Mary; with a fateful loan and alimony payments yet to murder him, he founded Socialize. At the beginning, they threw \$5,000-a-plate fundraising dinners that failed completely ("For some reason I expected big gives from the very echelon of society I was trying to eliminate"), so Taren took shifts at an oyster bar while the company relaunched at the opposite end of the price-point spectrum, trawling not the lunkers of philanthropy but the small fry of disposable

income. He'd formulated the relationship between pragmatism, profit, and pride: put two in conflict and forget the third. Nonprofits, he learned, supplicated the idle rich, ate young hearts, and defrauded the middle class.

Then the divorce. He'd accidentally left one page of his prenup uninitialed—the pages had been stuck together with his daughter's apple juice—nullifying it. "Wiped out by a drop of apple juice!" went ballistic. For weeks I'd lie in bed with my face in a pillow and my ass in the air screaming 'Apple juice! MOTHERFUCKING APPLE JUICE!'"

Cory said, "You went bananas over apples."

Characteristically, Taren did not smile or laugh but instead nodded and said, "That's funny. I spent hours driving down Highway 1, not to relax, just to depreciate the car before my wife took half."

Twirling a pair of scissors around his finger, Taren recounted the quiet slow tragedy of therapeutic jurisprudence and child-centered divorce, the arbitration center with its separate entrances. He hated being an absentee dad, hated forfeiting 60 percent of his income to support the willfully unemployed woman who kept his daughter away from him, while she indoctrinated his daughter with a narrative of courageous single-motherhood. All she did was stick a spoon in the kid's mouth! Whereas *he* was paying for the piano lessons and body-positive dolls and computer camp; if he didn't, he risked warping her with that ubiquitous American materialism borne of aspirational envy, plus he'd go to jail. "Shitty little compromises. That's marriage: never-ending shitty little compromises. Beesting and paper cuts unto death. That's business, too, if you have the liability of a conscience." He smiled meaninglessly at Cory. "Family's overrated. Make a plan. Make money and focus on work. Before you get old like me."

"You're not old!" Cory said. "You're seasoned."

"Pssh. Seasoned, right!" He pointed to the scorches of silver in his hair. "Salt-and-pepper, there's your seasoning."

Taren got up and bid Cory good night. Obviously that was the moment she should've offered him a shoulder rub, taken his glasses off and—something. Rejection would've been disastrous, but if he was going to . . . goddamn internalized passivity. Now he was dead for want of vice.

Cory kept scanning Taren's will, slaloming across each page, until on the sixth page she came across a highlighted passage:

14.1 I bequeath my nonprofit company, Socialize, and all the real property and business interests attached to it to my Outreach Manager, Cordelia Rosen, who will assume the title, duties, and responsibilities of Executive Director, and will receive full control of the company's assets.

That was her. Her name. Was it even legal to saddle an employee with a debt-ridden company? Would the board approve? Did they even know Taren was dead? She could just refuse. But Taren had singled Cory out, with such *fait-accomplis* wording. He saw potential in her. A cold, keen executive heart. Or maybe he just didn't have anybody else.

## II. Benefit Is Complicity

Cory pedaled into a headwind with white scratches of rain wetting her face, navigating home by pigeon-instinct while her higher cognition performed triage. Work first: no snacks, no weed. Maybe

go to the library to read case studies of companies whose bosses died. Or call Will and ask him to look up info online.

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The SoMa commune Cory shared with four roommates was a converted cookie factory. There were rooms insofar as roofless partitions could be rooms; a fart in one room was heard as distinctly as a fuck in the next. Thrifty strangers constantly arrived and vanished, smoked and dealt. In the rare intervals when everyone was gone, like now, it was gorgeous with capacity.

Cory walked her white Bianchi into the hangar-size room, the flimsy ticking of its wheels tripled by the echo. Navigating to her bedroom in the far corner of the warehouse was like strolling down Market Street, with its miscellaneous zoning and visible class gradients: Roopa's tidy earth-toned decor, Jinnie's live-in painting studio, the garbage bags piled in front of Laura's room awaiting disposal, Bailey's strip-club decor (leopard-print couch, mirror-plated dressers), then Cory's room, a lofted penalty box with a bare lamp and a tiny unopenable window, through which you could see the glass teal Infinity Towers mounted like enormous humidifiers in the skyline.

Before entering her room, Cory heard the front door open distantly—probably Roopa, from the sounds of rustling vegetation. Roopa was big on food fads, and her current regimen was a self-invented one she called “ruminarianism”: every day she rode the BART to Berkeley or Piedmont and wandered in meadows to pick mushrooms and herbs while listening to her iPod, then Dumpster-dived at Trader Joe's, all for a meal she'd spend two more hours cooking. She grew chanterelles in Mycodome and sage and holy basil on the bathroom windowsill. Before this, she'd abjured meals in favor of chewing on little biscuits that looked like owl pellets; before that it was low-fat raw veggie and Master Cleanse.

If Roopa knew Cory was home, she'd want to talk at her; it was how she amused herself while cooking, recounting the quottedium of chores and bores. Cory avoided drinking water near her, to head off a sermon about how we were *literally* flushing water down the toilet and everyone should just embrace urotherapy like the ancient Egyptians.

Cory lifted up on her bedroom doorknob to keep the hinges from creaking as she opened the door and slumped in, and dropped her bag and bike helmet. She lay on her futon and gazed at the bookshelves at the foot of her bed, close enough that any minor earthquake would tip them over and kill her. She wouldn't be awful to be killed by them, she supposed: the Chomsky and Klein, Gramsci and hooks, Freire and Alinsky and Hall, even *Atlas Shrugged*, which she'd read just to hate it better. But none of them told you what to do when your boss died.

She was too hungry to read anyway—her hands twitched as she overheard Roopa in the kitchen: the faucet gush, the knife clack and skillet sounds of greens on low simmer. The cozy yellow odors of dinner crept in over her partition walls. Cory considered lighting incense to counter the scent, but once her cravings came, they never left until oversatisfied. She got up light-headed, helpless, and her legs forced her to the kitchen.

ROOPA STOOD AT the stove in a capital R, a hand bracing her tailbone and one leg stretched back, with her waxy black hair tressing down like a stripe of brushed pitch, ending in a horizontal slash at midwaist. Her face was babyish and marsupial-thin. She wasn't ravishing, but she wasn't unattractive *but* men definitely treated her as if she *were* ravishing. She wore a blue apron over a brown dress with the sleeves ripped off. Cast-iron pans and stew pots were stationed over all four burners.

“Oh, you should've told me you were home, I would've made more,” Roopa said. “It's potato hash with fennel and rosemary and Niman Ranch bacon and tempeh. And TVP.”

“It's okay, thanks,” Cory said.

“I found chèvre too. The Trader Joe’s ones are ginormous. And they throw it out fully wrapped. Think how many landfill acres are taken up just by airtight cheese. Sure you don’t want any?”

“Yeah, no, I’m good.”

“Really? You sure?”

“Thanks, I’m fine.”

Cory opened the refrigerator. It was a maddening presence—always on, drawing an eighth of the electricity, just to store food. It carried a permanent stench of chilled compost and was crammed with communal groceries; Cory spent an eternity rearranging items to get to her week-old bok choy stir-fry leftovers. It was greasy, *awfully* greasy. She could do radishes and hummus for fiber, soy milk for protein, liquid amino for more protein. She took out the hummus and the soy milk and put the hummus back in and borrowed a nectarine from Jinnie’s shelf, and then took the hummus out again, jogging it in her hands to ponder its mass, its lipids and carbs, though she already knew all the numbers to the tenth decimal. Also she’d heard this particular hummus had done something bad in Palestine. Her hunger stabbed her; she tossed the hummus back in the fridge and took out her Tupperware of stir-fry. She just wouldn’t eat the whole thing.

“That’s your dinner?” Roopa said, in that sympathetic/annoyed tone you used with confused foreign tourists. “Where’s the flavor? Aren’t you at least going to heat it up and plate it?”

“Nah.”

Roopa turned to the stove and mounded a plate with a few hundred thousand calories of glistening tempeh. The odor made Cory’s saliva salty. “Try this. It’s yummy and it’s totally sanitary. Nom nom nom.”

“Thanks, Roop, but I gotta eat this—”

“Before it goes bad? That’s so *depressing*. It probably doesn’t even have any nutrients after all that refrigeration. Try my food. I know it seems gross to eat ‘garbage,’ but people have to get over that.”

Cory laid her things on the kitchen counter. When she had first moved to the city, the plan had been to recruit kindred progressives into the warehouse, maybe becoming one of those Bay Area cultural polestars. She first met Roopa at Socialize’s garden harvest potluck three months ago, and spotting a potential girlfriend or roommate or both, Cory had approached Roopa and smoked her out. As Cory wondered how to broach Roopa’s sexual and political alignments, Roopa was already headed straight for those topics: two years at Oberlin as a sexual health advisor who practiced what she preached, a year in South America for her anthropology thesis (“Recuperating Presence: The Immediacy of Indigene Consciousness”—in lieu of Eurocentric written documents, she’d produced photo-graphs and small beaded weavings). Then she’d dropped out for culinary school in Boston, dropping out again to couch-surf California.

In Cory’s stoned brain, Roopa had seemed ideal, and they moved her in ASAP. But it turned out they weren’t equally political, just equally pedantic. At first Cory had been thrilled that Roopa attended Socialize events, but Roopa would keep offering unsolicited advice (“I still think marriage equality isn’t the issue. We need to *abolish marriage*”). In turn, Roopa brought Cory to her anarchic “salons”—usually potlucks or homebrewed pickle tastings at other collectives, where discussions played on conspiratorial themes: 9/11 was an inside job, canned tomatoes caused Parkinson’s, etc. An urban primitive with pepperoni-size ear gauges wondered aloud if heterosexual intercourse was “inherently degrading.” Cory got through it only by pretending she was conducting an anthropological study of failed radicalism. Roopa understood Cory’s lack of enthusiasm as liberal wimpiness, which she liked taking potshots at, like now.

“I think,” Cory said, “we can divest from industrial monoculture instead of relying on its waste. You know how they say benefit is complicity.”

“The real waste would be to let food spoil for an empty gesture.”

“Couldn’t we put community pressure on supermarkets to reduce waste in the first place?”

“The fact is”—Roopa sucked a crumb that had fallen on her apron—“that the waste is there now and it supports indigent communities.”

“Well, you’re right about that. Is it really okay for people like us to take free food we don’t need?”

“There’s plenty for everyone. Also, I’m not exactly well-off.” Roopa laughed. “I’d starve if it didn’t hit the Dumpsters. It’s not like I’m exploiting food stamps. I’m part of the working poor.”

Somehow Roopa got by, part-time and under the table, freelancing as a food photographer and botanical illustrator. Cory didn’t want to have to explain the distinction between poor and broke. Spurning the nine-to-five was fine, but Cory suspected Roopa’s work ethic was rooted in a determination to feel good about feeling good. Still, it was baffling how Roopa could afford San Francisco on freelance wages. Cory *did* take food stamps.

“I think you just get off on guilt,” Roopa said, closing her eyes and making cumming noises as she forked up a mouthful of hash and worked it around in her mouth without chewing.

Cory’s eyelids glitched. “I wasn’t saying Dumpster-diving is immoral. I was only thinking maybe it’d be best not to create a social institution dependent on corporate excess.”

“We’re redeeming the waste. It’s putting ideals into action on the most basic level.”

“Spending half a day making dinner, that’s ‘action’?”

“That’s the role food *should* play in people’s lives. Food is culture, just like songs and painting. I’ve had meals that made me cry. Some people are visual, others are tactile, and actually I’m a synesthete so I’m kinda both, but I also get so much meaning in through my mouth.”

But so painfully little *out from* her mouth . . . “Well, air is important too. Should we spend hours every day working on breathing?”

“Doy. Ever heard of yoga? I’m only sort of kidding.”

Cory wouldn’t win. Roopa was rigid, the way free spirits often were, about the romance of naturopathy and well-being as morality. Photographing meals, food blogging, recreational fasting—a life that time committed to sweeping the steps of her temple. It was at least as disordered as what Cory had. There was this spin, this indulgent *spin* to Roopa’s charity: when she did relief in Chile, she returned with a copper-goddess tan; if she volunteered for a bake sale, it was because she enjoyed baking. Her diet was another slick win-win rationalization of glut. Good intentions notwithstanding, that was the lemon-meringue heart of her frankly dipshit worldview: that merely observing selective austerities—abstaining from work, from money—was activism, when really it was shallow *passivism*. . . .

Roopa turned off the burners and unlaced her apron. She never looked tired. “Honestly,” Roopa said, “people who shop in supermarkets should be forced to spend a day in a cage, like factory chickens. And those of us who didn’t go to Stanford don’t have the option to buy bougie farmer market greens.”

Like Cory was so rich! As if she lorded her diploma around! She hated that no matter what she did, her achievements redounded to a massively endowed, for-profit corporation—Stanford, Inc. But complaining about this would make her seem even *more* stuck-up. “Yeah, okay, Roopa? First of all, you went to Oberlin. Second, I’m just as broke as you, and my degree means nothing in the nonprofit world—well, I know privilege is invisible, but . . .” Cory pressed a thumb to her temple, where a *éclair* of migraine was about to light up a deep furrow of her brain. “Look, we both hate consumer waste. I prefer a policy approach, and you—well, you tell me.”

Roopa leaned in and seized Cory’s hand. Cory hated rhetorical touching. “All politics are spiritu-

issues first,” Roopa said.

Oh, ~~fuck~~ this. Roopa always fled to superstition. Sometimes she couched gemstones on her body “smooth out her energy,” and at day’s end Cory would hear raw gems scattering on the floor as they dropped from the cups of Roopa’s bra, a few more clicking down as she shook her hair. And men did love their bedazzled sex object. But more to the point, Roopa had this kernel of willed impracticality like when Cory proposed a common-area cleaning schedule and she’d said, *I don’t believe in linear time*. Irrationality was comprehensible; Roopa was *prerational*.

Cory drew her breath for the steep ascent. “Okay, ‘the spirit.’ What is it? How do you base decisions on it?”

“Soul, qi, quantum energy, kundalini, whatever. It’s the force field that’s dissimulated throughout everything.” It was extremely typical of Roopa to misuse a big word for emphasis. “It’s about intuition. Instead of forcing things into this rigid paternalistic framework of, like, X equals Y.”

“Isn’t it *more* paternalist to assign a gender to logic?”

“I’m just saying, if you insist on denying a spiritual existence, why discuss it? You can believe in it or not.”

“I don’t.”

“I’m sorry, but that’s your limitation,” Roopa said, wounded with empathy.

They were experiencing the same exact pissy offendedness. Cory tugged the hairs over her left temple, where her migraine strobed, depositing curly afterlights in the air above Roopa’s head. Her kundalini visible. Cory withdrew her sweaty hand. “I’m gonna go eat in my room.”

“I think my background gives me a different perspective. When my parents came over from India they had nothing—they couldn’t, like, lobby supermarkets. Minorities understand power structures.”

“You know I’m *Jewish*, right?”

“Um, seriously? You’re white. Sorry, but dreadlocks don’t give you the voice of color.”

Roopa was right, sure; but come *on*, like a cute skinny desi didn’t have it *way* better than a chubby Jew! As if Roopa couldn’t eat whatever, sleep whenever, fuck whomever, believe any and all woo-woo bullshit . . . Cory’s irritation alerted her to the dangers of blithely dismissing people of color and bitchily undermining other women, red flags of internalized bias; though Roopa was clearly exaggerating to gain yardage—ugh, but *that* might be a privileged intuition too. Then again, who was Roopa to condemn privilege, as a cisgender bobo, equally inoffensive in conventional society and her so-called underground?

Cory stood and turned away before Roopa could get the wrong idea about her tears. “I’m going to my room,” Cory said.

“Okay. Cory, please don’t get upset. Enjoy your supper. I won’t tell Jinnie you took her fruit.”

Cory left a trail of smoldering footprints back to her room. Sitting on her futon, she opened the Tupperware and pushed her fork into her food and then her mouth. Frigid and bland. Cory hated being vegetarian. She loved meat but was also *mad* at it, having acquired the taste in childhood innocence. The lip-glazing completeness of a cheeseburger, bacon’s salty crunch. She loved meat and hated kale and yoga and hated women who fetishized kale and yoga, capitulations to the male gaze marketed as fitness. The only problem with eating meat was that it was evil for every conceivable reason. Cory did more than abstain; she resisted.

Thoughtful people who wanted to extend their unmerited fortune to others, without expectation of profit or recognition, sheepishly accepting the discredit and liabilities of their privilege: they’d always be the most irrelevant minority. And then there was the self—the universal minority.

Cory consumed half of her cold gluey meal with her eyes closed. It was like what people would do

if they didn't have tongues. Her mouth was dry, but she wouldn't go back to the kitchen for water, so she tilted the rest of the stir-fry into her wastebasket and put out the light. She answered her stomach aching ribbit with a dash of hot sauce, and pulled at her miserylocks, which felt like kudzu rooting into her skull. Weed would relieve the headache but it'd make her hungrier. Everything was wasting energy. She sat on her futon, adapting to the dark, and spoke aloud to her migraine.

### III. The Patriarch

After an hour-long nap, during which she dreamed she was cutting a huge yellow toenail out of Roopa's foot, Cory got back to work. She squinted at the printed financial records that she'd taken from the office's filing cabinets—TFS, OCF, EBITDA. Were these good numbers? What was the difference between earnings, revenue, and income? She hung a perplexed finger in her mouth. She didn't even know if they could afford an accountant: she'd need to hire an accountant to know.

She felt mute and illiterate in the language of power, which was money. She knew that corporate oligarchs used it to subvert democracy. But she was hazy on macro and micro; how US trade agreements affected sweatshop conditions in Indonesia; what the Fed *did*, exactly. Her efforts to research the housing market crisis ended in page-crumpling fury—credit default swaps? Mortgage backed securities? Collateralized debt obligations? How could people be moral when morality obliges you to know *everything*? It was her fault for not studying econ in college, but she'd had so much contempt for the future bankers that it had seemed principled not to.

Her landline phone felt enormous when she picked it up. She dialed, sort of hoping nobody would answer, but on the last trill of the sixth ring, someone did—it was Barr.

Cory momentarily forgot whether the caller or answerer was supposed to speak first. "Hello," they said at the same time.

"Hi, Dad, it's me. Just checking in."

"Well, that's astonishing. And to think your mother isn't around to witness this rarest of terrestrial phenomena. Years from now, I'll remember I was sitting at my desk, October 3, 2007, when my firstborn daughter, Cordy . . ."

She hated that name. In high school her mom had vetoed Delia and Cory, insisting they were respectively "too similar to" and "not as pretty as" Deirdre, her sister's name. She wished there were something worse to call him than *Dad*. "So yeah, how are things, Dad?"

"Fine, thank you. Okay then, how much money are we talking?"

"That is not fair, Dad."

"So then this is a social call?"

"Whatever. Fine. You want me to get real? I do need money."

"That's more like it."

"But not *your* money. I want to *make* money."

"I thought you were allergic."

"Dad, can I explain?"

She caught him up on Taren's death and her promotion. She had no trouble admitting that Barr had the business mind, self-made in the heyday of deregulation. After graduating from Stanford, he sensed a bonanza in lifting things for wimpy undergrads and founded his moving company, Barr Non-Six days a week he'd carried beds and bookcases, filling his palms with slivers of wood and metal under a half inch of craggy brown callus. He franchised across Northern California, adding all-Latin



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