WHERE THINGS THRIVE

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Some of the main literary influences of my thesis include: Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, Flannery O’Connor, and Walker Percy. Barry Hannah, who not only focuses on the past but also manages to merge it with the present, influenced the way external factors shape my stories. Ford, on the other hand, who focuses on relationships and the private lives of couples, influenced the way I approach the internal aspects of my stories, while O’Connor influenced the inclusion of mass culture aspects such as advertising. Percy, though, influenced the way I structured the majority of my stories. Some of the main themes that emerge in my thesis include displacement, loss, and identity. Because my main literary influences do contain such different writing styles, I do not draw from their style as much as Hannah and Ford’s postmodern sensibilities and Percy’s structural approach.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Southern Tradition</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Mass Culture</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Place</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of Walker Percy</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Autochthonous Ideal</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Mermaid</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Singapore With Space</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Here Is The End Of Japan</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Wayside Exhibit</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Rottingham Divine</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Southern Tradition

Although I was born in the South and grew up in the South, I sometimes grow weary of all things southern. The deep heritage and culture that emanates from the South is, to me, at once comforting and oppressive. While some of the traditions of the South, such as love of history, family, and the past, are what help the area to thrive, these traditions can manifest as clichés or caricatures—the crazy aunt, the beer-belly uncle, or the violent neighbor, for example. The problem of writing a thesis that included clichéd or stereotypical characters and situations concerned me. As a result, I decided to set all of the stories for my thesis in the Northeast part of the country. Problem solved: or so I thought.

I decided to not limit myself in theme, character traits, or plot, and I made the decision to set the stories outside of the South. If the stories still contained typical Southern characteristics, I would then re-assess my situation. I realized, after many horrid first drafts, that I could not expect to write anything decent if I was not true to my Southern heritage. Trying to take the South and all of its influence out of my writing was, I discovered, not a good idea.

My desire to escape writing about the South led me to write about New York City, a place I had lived for almost three years and a place that appreciates traditions
much unlike those of the South. Even though all of the stories in my thesis are set in New York, I still found myself writing about traditionally southern topics such as love of family, history, and the past.

My attempt to prevent myself from writing about all things Southern was not an indication of dislike for the South, but rather a dislike for the difficulty of writing about such a complex place. In writing this thesis, I have found it impossible to extricate myself from my Southern heritage. As a result, my stories produce situations that show my protagonist as a person who embraces her Southern legacy and who is displaced in New York City, rather than a person who tries to shed her Southern skin and fit into the Northern culture.

In his book, *The Southern Writer in the Postmodern World*, Fred Hobson chronicles the topics of Southern writers throughout the twentieth century, citing, for the most part, historical references as having influenced these writers. By examining Southern writers from the 1920s to the 1990s, Hobson is able to illustrate how writing has changed as society has changed. In my introduction, I will utilize Hobson’s analysis of these writers and their influences to discuss how the stories in my thesis correspond to this study as well as differ from it.

Hobson cites an evolving South as the reason why many Southern writers in the 1920s chose to write about topics such as progress and tradition. More specifically, Hobson states that the Southern writer of that decade “…had left home for a time, focused his eye on a changing South, an industrializing South, but looked as well at a South that was slipping away, and the result was a creative mixture of detachment and
involvement—an escape from, then an attempt to return to the southern community—that contributed greatly to the work of Faulkner and Wolfe and the Southern Agrarians” (3). Although I do not think a “changing South” has influenced me in writing stories that have themes such as “detachment” and “involvement,” I do find these themes interesting, especially when juxtaposed in the same story. This juxtaposition is something I was interested in exploring in my first story, “Mermaid.” Without societal influences of a newly industrialized South to draw upon, I utilized more contemporary devices, such as postmodern thought, to incorporate themes of “detachment” and “involvement” into the story.

In my story, “Mermaid,” the protagonist, Karen, has just moved to New York City from Tennessee and is required to take photographs of a parade for her job. I wanted to use the themes of “detachment” and “involvement” in this story because Karen has detached herself from the South, and I was interested in seeing how well she could assimilate into a much different environment in New York. Throughout the story, she is detached not only from her familiar environment but also from reality because what she sees in the story is mostly through the lens of a camera. By using the postmodern tactic of filtering reality through a lens, I wanted to explore how successfully she could become involved in her new environment.

One way I tried to explore this process is through the use of the controlling metaphor of exposure. I find it fascinating to resolve a story through the use of metaphor—when possible—instead of through action. In “Mermaid,” I use the controlling metaphor of exposure to illustrate the protagonist’s struggle to find a new
identity as she enters her thirties. For example, in the story, the protagonist is literally exposed by the blinding sun present in the setting of the story, and her fear of rejection is also exposed. Through the use of the controlling metaphor, I attempt to show how the protagonist changes and how she is able to somewhat successfully integrate into her new environments—that of her thirties and that of the North.

While the Southern writers of the 1920s focused on a “changing South,” according to Hobson, writers of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s attempted to “…define… the Southern Temper, the Southern Mind” (3). Hobson attributes these aspects to “…the Civil War and its aftermath—a greater attention to the past, an acceptance of man’s finiteness, his penchant for failure, a tragic sense.” He also states:

…the Southern writer of that latter period [the 60s] continued to be fascinated with history, with the Southern past and the individual past as it was involved with the regional past. And the Southern writer through the 1960s seemed very much aware, as well, of those writers who had gone before. Most notable Southern novelists through the 1960s… still wrote with an eye very much on past Southern giants. (4-5)

Hobson states that these qualities “…are more characteristic of the Southerner than of other Americans” (3). Although my stories do contain aspects of topics utilized by Southern writers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, I do not feel that my stories attempt to describe the “Southern Mind.” Of course, my stories do describe the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist, who happens to be from the South, but I tried to focus on her humanness, rather than her Southernness.
Hobson also describes the attempts of writers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s to “…capture the Southerner, to define him or her…before he slipped away” (3). I can understand why the writers of that era felt compelled to write about this topic, and I can understand why many more recent Southern writers still felt the need to define the Southerner. I, however, tried very hard to steer away from this focus because I wanted these stories in my thesis to concentrate on one particular person during one particular time in her life without imposing the broader scope of her heritage.

In addition to stating that the writers of the 1950s tried to classify the Southerner, Hobson also asserts that they, along with writers of the 1960s, focused on “place, family, community, and religion.” Although I tried to escape focusing on “the Southern Mind” in my stories, I did not try to alleviate references to family or to the past. While I did not focus on community and religion in my stories, as did the writers of the 1960s, I delve into the protagonist’s history and family, especially in my stories “Wayside Exhibit” and “Here is the End of Japan.” This history, though, is not a history particular only to South; it is a history that is common to all Americans—World War II and the Korean War.

“Wayside Exhibit” focuses on the protagonist’s family and on the Korean War. Through this historical reference of the Korean War, the protagonist is able to learn not only about the nation’s history but also about herself. It is through this reference that the protagonist is encouraged to persevere. Southern writers, especially in the 1950s, used this tactic through references to the South’s history. Although I like the idea of having a story focus on history, I did not want to limit my protagonist to her own regional history. I wanted her to be part of something more collective. In addition, this story includes
some of the protagonist’s family—her sister and brother-in-law—who play a major role in the development of the story by vocalizing their opinions of New York City.

The story also has a minor character who is from New York City. It is from this character, not her family, that the protagonist learns about the Korean War and about herself. Even though she is displaced in New York City, she uses that to her advantage to learn from others and from their history, instead of limiting herself to her own familiar references and to advice from her family.

“Wayside Exhibit” also utilizes the controlling metaphor to emphasize how the protagonist is influenced. As in “Mermaid,” “Wayside Exhibit” is resolved through the controlling metaphor. In “Wayside Exhibit,” the city is shown as actually having life:

I stared out the window at the yellow taxis as they sped down Second Avenue, honking cars and roaring city buses in tow, a steady flow of motion, pumping through the veins of streets in the city, giving life…There were eyes everywhere in that building. Even the windows on either side of the building looked like eyes, a face staring back at you every time you walked in. Nothing went unnoticed.

Because it has a metaphorical life, the city is able to revive the protagonist’s deflated state of mind. By using the controlling metaphor, I wanted to show—as is the case with “Mermaid”—how the protagonist perseveres while being displaced.

In “Here is the End of Japan,” on the other hand, I use history, the protagonist’s family, and her past to tell the story. The historical reference in this story is World War II, and it is used to reflect the negative emotions that the protagonist has for her sister. This history is, as in “Wayside Exhibit,” reflective of a national history and not a regional
References to the past and to her family are seen through flashbacks to the protagonist’s childhood and are intertwined with present interactions with her sister, revealing Karen’s unwillingness to allow her sister to dominate her.

Hobson states that, in comparison to the topics of history, family, and the past presented in the 1960s, the 1970s had

…but one quality which much of the writing…did share with the writing that had gone before [and that] was an acute self-consciousness, an intense awareness of being southern, as well as a preoccupation with old themes, old settings and truisms. Many white Southern writers, generally speaking, still thought they had a love-hate relationship with the South whether they did or not, and those writers had to write the traditional work coming to terms with their homeland. (6)

Trying to avert a “preoccupation, with old themes, old settings and truisms,” I did want to avoid placing my protagonist in an environment where she might need to be concerned with such issues. One of my main goals in taking her out of the South and placing her in New York City was to give her a better opportunity to have universal conflicts as opposed to those particular to Southerners. I also wanted to try and alleviate the pressure of having to discuss the complexities of the South. If these complexities appeared as a result of my protagonist’s past or her personality, I felt that was more honest and real than having them appear just because of a Southern setting.

In addition to comparing the 1970s with the 1960s, Hobson also cites the 1960s as possibly being “…pivotal in southern life and letters in much the same way as the 1920s: it was a time of numerous southern crimes against humanity, of notable attention and criticism from without, of great intellectual ferment” (7). Hobson also regards that
decade as a time when the “…South changed, a watershed in southern thought resulted—and, in some ways, a new southern fiction emerged” (7). This “new southern fiction” is marked by a voice that I have long been interested in and studied. Hobson defines this voice as being that of “…those writers…who were born during or since the Second World War and came of age in the 1950s and 1960s, what one might call the third generation of modern Southern literature” (8).

Hobson, however, does not believe, excluding a few exceptions, that these writers of “new southern fiction” subscribe to new ways of achieving that fiction. For example, he states:

…the contemporary southern writer—with the exception of John Barth, and, on occasion, writers such as Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, and James Alan McPherson—essentially accepts, rather than invents, his world, is not given to fantasy, does not in his fiction question the whole assumed relationship between narrator and narrative, does not question the nature of fiction itself. The contemporary southern fiction writer, although he or she may experience with time sequence and point of view (as the great southern modernist Faulkner did, after all), in more basic respects usually plays by the old rules of the game. (9)

I feel that my stories do fall into the category of subscribing to the old ways—concentrating on history, family, and the past—while experimenting with time sequence but not point of view.

In addition to classifying contemporary writers, Hobson also gives an overview of this group. He first states:

…most recent Southern writers seem, at least at first glance, to be comparatively devoid of influence from past literary giants, and certainly are now out of the
shadow of Faulkner. If there is any shadow they operate within (and such a conclusion I reach not only in considering some of the best fiction that has been published in the South in the past fifteen years but also from having looked a couple of thousand manuscripts which came across the desk of the Southern Review in the late 1980s), it is that of Eudora Welty and, to a lesser extent, Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy, not Faulkner. (9)

My stories do correspond to this generalization because of O’Connor’s mass culture influence on all of my stories and Percy’s influence on the structure of “Here is the End of Japan” and “Wayside Exhibit.”

**Influence of Mass Culture**

In Hobson’s second overview about contemporary writers, he states:

…most of the writers I am talking about—Bobbie Ann Mason, Josephine Humphreys, Lee Smith, Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, Jayne Anne Phillips, Clyde Edgerton, and Jill McCorkle, to name several—immerse their characters’ in a world of popular or mass culture, and their character’s perceptions of place, family, community, and even myth are greatly conditioned by popular or mass culture, television, movies, rock music, and so forth…(9-10)

Each one of these perceptions—excluding myth—as seen by my protagonist, is influenced by mass culture including: photography in the first story, “Mermaid;” the threat of inner city violence in “Singapore With Space,” the second story; media-generated stereotypes of New York City and minorities in the third story, “Here is the End of Japan”; advertising in the fourth story, “Wayside Exhibit”; and music in “Rottingham Divine,” the fifth story.
The most direct influence of mass culture is manifested in “Wayside Exhibit” through the use of advertising. In this story, the protagonist has become disillusioned with the city because of her job in advertising. This idea of having advertising affect a character is an influence of Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*. Although “Wayside Exhibit” does not address the multi-layered issues that O’Connor raises in her novel, it does take issue with theories of advertising such as persuasion and products representing positive and negative images.

Of mass culture’s influence on contemporary southern fiction, Hobson states: “Now, in part because of its pervasiveness, its powerful influence, we must take mass culture much more seriously. One finds, because of popular culture, new twists on old concerns and preoccupations, new ways of perceiving. It is not enough to simply dismiss all this as K-Mart Realism, or its even poorer country cousin, the wondrously named Grit Lit” (11). In “Wayside Exhibit,” my protagonist works for an advertising agency and is disheartened by advertising’s “powerful influence.” The protagonist of “Wayside Exhibit” laments her involvement with the industry:

My job was as a graphic designer for an advertising agency. What I designed looked very chic, shiny, and alluring when the final ad appeared, but at its heart, it was a farce. At its center, it was polluted and caked with as much lies and deceit as my walls were caked with soot. We deceived people, manipulated them. Made them think they couldn’t live without a certain product: Stylz Now: Get That Uptown Look With Downtown Prices; You Can’t Go Wrong With Rite-Way; Gotta Getta A Glam Look With Glitz Girls’ Go-Go Lipstick.
In this passage, the protagonist equates her dislike of the grimy city with her dislike of what she perceives to be a grimy industry. This portion of the story reflects Hobson’s assertion of popular culture causing “new twists on old concerns and preoccupations.” This section also reflects the O’Connor influence. In *Wise Blood*, Enoch Emery wants to have a positive outlook on life, and he believes in the ads he sees. He accepts the ads at face value: “He wanted to better his condition until it was the best. He wanted to be THE young man of the future, like the ones in the insurance ads. He wanted, some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand” (O’Connor 108).

Haze Motes—the protagonist in *Wise Blood*—is disillusioned everything from advertising to his faith in God. The list of ad slogans in my story was influenced by O’Connor’s description of Taulkinham on the night that Haze first enters town: “When he got to Taulkinham, as soon as he stepped off the train, he began to see the signs and lights. PEANUTS, WESTERN UNION, AJAX, TAXI, HOTEL, CANDY. Most of them were electric and moved up and down or blinked frantically” (O’Connor 15).

Another writer whose work has had a great influence on me and whose work is inundated with the influence of mass culture is Barry Hannah. Of Hannah’s work, Hobson states: “…it is a world of Lear jets, fast cars, easy sex and drugs, high-tech rockabilly, new style misogyny, and general social and cultural fragmentation” (36). In Hannah’s story, “Testimony of Pilot,” the protagonist essentially loses his hearing because he is a drummer for a rock band: “I went through College. To me it is interesting that I kept a B average and did it all deaf…I loved music and never heard it” (Hannah 247). Music plays a huge role in this story, drawing the protagonist to other
characters: “Being deaf had brought me up closer to people. There were only about five
I knew, but I knew their mouth movements, the perspiration under their noses, their
tongues moving over the crowns of their teeth, their fingers on their lips” (Hannah 249).

In my story, “Rottingham Divine,” music also plays a key role. Because the
protagonist’s boyfriend is a session guitar player, she is separated from him for six
months out of the year. The boyfriend eventually gets a permanent job, and the
protagonist is forced to choose between staying in New York or moving to Austin with
him. Music is the catalyst that drives the protagonist to learn more about herself, her love
for the city, but, instead of bringing her closer to people, as in Hannah’s story, it separates
her from her boyfriend.

Influence of Place

When deciding whether or not to set all of the stories in my thesis in New York
City, I first had to decide if I thought I had a firm enough grasp of place to write about it
convincingly. I was not sure if living in the city for almost three years would be long
enough to provide me with a true sense of this city, but I was willing to try. Of all the
Southern writers who inspire me, Richard Ford, a Southern born and bred writer, inspired
me the most while deciding whether or not to write about a place that is not native to me.
Ford has long been one of my favorite writers, and one thing that draws me to his writing
is his choice of setting, whether he writes about New Jersey, the Midwest, or Paris.
Hobson quotes Ford on his definition of place: “Place he [Ford] defines as ‘wherever we
can find dominion over our subject and make it convincing’” (42). I felt that if I could
provide insight and sincerity, I could make my stories set in New York City convincing.

The first novel that I read by Ford was The Sportswriter, and this is where I first
saw how a Southern writer can write about Southern traditions (history, family, the past)
without having a Southern setting.
Hobson refers to Frank Bascombe, Ford’s protagonist in The Sportswriter, as…the Southern expatriate for the eighties, with no interest in past, place, family, religion, community, guilt, and burdens of history, family or regional or otherwise… [however] the more Frank protests he is not interested in the past, in family, in place, and in the South, the more we are convinced that he is; and so, despite his own lack of storied past, distinguished family, and fixed place, is his creator, Ford. Frank’s great interest in the absence of past, of historical burden, of family heritage, of fixed place, of community suggests a southern mind that is fascinated by these things. (49)

I found this idea of having a “Southern mind” in a Northern setting to be fascinating and decided that writing about such a situation would be challenging and exhilarating, especially considering that I wanted to create a convincing sense of place.

I felt that setting my stories in New York City would allow me to better explore place and its impact on the protagonist’s thoughts. Hobson describes the importance of place for Bascombe: “Frank Bascombe…is keenly attuned to place. Although he calls himself ‘a man with no place to go in particular,’ wherever he goes…he has a great desire, nearly compulsion, to link with place…a great sensitivity to where things are, what happened there, and what they meant” (50).

The concept of place is not only relevant in the setting of my stories but also in the order they appear in my thesis. In an effort to emphasize the importance of place, I paid careful consideration to the placement of my stories. I first had this idea when I wrote my first thesis story—story number three, “Here if the End of Japan.” Location—or place—plays a part in the resolution of this story. Although this story focuses on the narrator’s past and family and on history, it is place that is the main focus. By the time I
had reached the end of the story, I realized how I wanted to arrange my thesis. Here are the lines from the story that convinced me:

When I had hugged Margaret on the platform before she boarded she said, ‘All good things must come to an end.’

‘Must they,’ I said, looking around at the resounding, grand Penn Station, Penn Station that sits right in the middle of the island, a hub for the city, nowhere near the end of the line. ‘I don’t know that they do, Margaret. Maybe they lose a little gusto from time to time. But I’m not sure that they have to end.’

‘Well, this is the end for me. I’m outta here. Nothing personal. I just need to get back to the south so I can thaw.’

I suppose it was the end for her. Guess it always would be. As for me, I realized that I was glad to be there in the middle, in the nucleus, where things positively charge, where things thrive.

After writing this story and realizing the importance of place, I decided to write a series of stories that progress geographically as the protagonist moves through her career and life in New York City. The series of five stories begins on Coney Island, the southern-most tip of NYC, and progresses to The Cloisters, one of the northern-most tips of Manhattan. The idea is to focus on the protagonist’s emotional progress as well as on her geographical progress and show how she becomes a stronger person as she explores the city.

**Influence of Walker Percy**

Another major influence on my thesis is the writing of Walker Percy, especially his novel, *The Moviegoer*. During the summer of 2005, before I started writing my thesis, I read excerpts from a biography of Walker Percy called *Walker Percy: A Life* by Patrick Samway. In this biography, Samway includes a chapter that chronicles the process Percy used to outline *The Moviegoer*. While I read the biography, I was
experiencing all of the aforementioned anxieties about setting my stories in the South. I then came across a section in which Samway states:

The adventures of Binx Bolling [the protagonist in The Moviegoer] in New Orleans did not spring full-blown from Walker’s imagination. It took him a while to conceive the characters. The structure, for the most part, originated from Walker’s experiences in New York as a medical student. In the initial draft of Diary of the Last Romantic, entitled “Confessions of a Movie-goer” (as The Moviegoer was first called), a Princeton graduate spends his Wanderjahr in New York, as his father has done years before. Living at the West Side Y and spending time in Central Park with the evening paper, the narrator likes to go to the movies. (189)

I thought this excerpt was interesting when compared to Hobson’s section on Richard Ford. One reason that I find these two sections interesting is because Percy takes his Northern experiences and explores them in a Southern setting, while Ford, who is a Southerner, explores his experiences in the Northern setting of New Jersey. Hobson comments on the Southern characteristics of Ford’s protagonist in The Sportswriter:

“…Frank is more southern than he professes—in particular, his rage against abstraction or rationalism and his love of mystery. His announced preference for the supernatural, the unknown…” (51-2). Hobson then goes on to compare Ford’s work to Percy’s:

“…Frank Bascombe in The Sportswriter has a voice very much like Binx Bolling’s in The Moviegoer (55). In addition, Hobson states:

It is not only the casual philosophizing…that links Frank with …Binx Bolling. Nor is it just the similar roles that Binx and Frank play, the one—as the title announces—a moviegoer, the other a sportswriter. Both are watchers: one watches movies, the other watches sports. Each is essentially passive. But
beyond that, it is the tone, the language, the cadences, the detailed social observation, the attention to southern types that links Ford with Percy. The ex-Southerner Frank has as keen as an eye for varieties of the southern species as Percy’s Binx… (56-7)

After considering the settings of these two novels and gaining an understanding of how these writers structured their conflicts, I decided to set all of my stories in New York City, especially after seeing how Ford seems to organize his novel according to principles set forth by Percy.

Another aspect from Percy’s biography that influenced me is a section in which Percy comments on injecting philosophy into his stories. In the section of the biography entitled “A Career Launched: The Moviegoer 1959-61,” Percy discusses his reasoning behind the crux of the novel:

Although philosophy is usually regarded in this country as a dry and abstract subject, it is one of the features of modern European thought that it focuses on concrete life-situations rather than abstractions. In particular, of course, it is mainly interested in the predicament of modern man, afflicted as he is with feelings of uprootedness, estrangement, anxiety and the like. It is quite natural, therefore, for philosophers like Sartre and Marcel to write plays and novels. It also seemed natural to me to express my ideas in a novel. And to give a more practical reason, people would rather read a novel than an article. (Samway 210)

These comments really resonated with me, in part because I do like to focus on “concrete life-situations rather than abstractions,” but mainly because I felt that my protagonist is “afflicted…with feelings of uprootedness, estrangement, anxiety.” I do not compare my stories, in any way, to Percy’s novel; however, I did learn from his novel how to inject
philosophy into a story through the use of concrete situations. I feel that this is most
evident in my story, “Singapore With Space.” In this story, I tried to focus more on ideas
than on action. Through the example of *The Moviegoer*, I learned how to let the action
unfold as a result of focusing on ideas instead of vice versa. My ideas are not
existentialist ideas as are Percy’s, but I was still intrigued to see if I could make the
“idea” story work. Although “Singapore With Space” is the second story in my thesis, it
is the last story that I wrote in the series. It was an exercise in trying to expand my ability
to tell a story. The concept of *The Moviegoer* helped me to find my way.

Percy goes on to say, in that same “Career Launched” chapter:

My novel is an attempt to portray the rebellion of two young people against the
shallowness and tastelessness of modern life. The rebellion takes different forms.
In Kate, it manifests itself through psychiatric symptoms: anxiety, suicidal
tendencies and the like. In Binx, it is a “metaphysical” rebellion—a search for
meaning which is the occasion of a rather antic life in a suburb of New Orleans.
(Samway 210)

From this statement, especially the first couple of sentences, I was able to better
understand how to structure “Singapore With Space.” The protagonist in my story does
not rebel against “the shallowness and tastelessness of modern life,” but she does rebel
against the chaos in the city. Percy’s novel helped me to learn how to show that chaos
instead of only tell about it. The following are several excerpts from the novel that
helped me grasp the concept of how to include philosophy in a “concrete life situation:”

The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I
have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the
Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park…I
too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man* (Percy 7)

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life…To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair” (Percy 13)

Kate watches, lips parted and dry. She understands my moviegoing but in her own antic fashion. There is a scene which shows the very neighborhood of the theater. Kate gives me a look—it is understood that we do not speak during the movie…She refers to a phenomenon of moviegoing which I have called certification…if [a person] sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere. (Percy 63)

Percy essentially bases the focus of his novel around these few passages. He is able to successfully ground his philosophies in the idea of moviegoing. This “concrete life situation” helped me to apply some of my own ideas in “Singapore With Space.” For example, I implemented the concept of Feng Shui into this story in order to illustrate how order can come from chaos. An “idea” story is something that I have wanted to explore for a long time. Writing my thesis has given me that chance.

**The Autochthonous Ideal**

The last section of Hobson’s book addresses a topic that I was most concerned with when I started writing my thesis. It is the topic that I addressed at the beginning of the introduction—creating characters that are stereotypically Southern. When I saw that Hobson addresses this issue in his book, I knew it was the right book for the critical
analysis portion of my thesis. In this last section of his book, Hobson cites poet and critic Donald Davidson as the person who first named the problem:

…according to Davidson, the Southerner, if he is not careful, is always in danger of becoming too much the self-conscious regionalist, one who begins with the recognition that he or she is primarily a ‘southern writer’ with an opportunity and obligation to present or interpret Southerners to the rest of the nation—an intent that can result either in creating regional ‘types’ (that is, local color) or can manifest itself in an excessive desire to explain. (79)

The reason why I am so sensitive to “creating regional ‘types,’” is because I have a tendency to rely on the stereotype instead of revealing the character in a natural way through scenes and dialogue. In my past writings, I have relied on the aforementioned “crazy aunt” character or the “violent neighbor” character to tell my story. Those stories always collapsed because they relied too heavily on a stereotype to carry the weight. In writing my thesis, I really wanted to make sure that type of situation did not occur.

Hobson states that Davidson calls the autochthonous ideal “… a condition in which the writer was in a certain harmony with his social and cultural environment, was nearly unconscious of it as a ‘special’ environment, quaint or rustic or backward, and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain” (80). The best current example of this ideal that Hobson cites is Ernest Gaines, who mostly lives in California but writes about Louisiana. Through his example of Gaines, Hobson illustrates how the element of exile has fostered the autochthonous ideal.

Since I grew up in the South but had lived for almost three years in New York City, I, too, wanted to try and capitalize on this facet of exile. I felt that I could only be
truly “unconscious” of my setting “as a ‘special’ environment” if I set my stories outside of the south. That may be the easy way to handle the situation, but I felt that, as a young writer, it was the only way for me to learn and to “cut my teeth,” so to speak. Before I started writing my thesis, I don’t feel that I had achieved the autochthonous ideal. As a result, I looked at my thesis as a time to learn how to foster that ideal through the aspect of exile. Through the guidance of my thesis director, many story revisions, and the study of such excellent writers such as Percy, Ford, and Hannah, I now understand how to better utilize the exile factor.

Another thing that I learned by trying to approach this autochthonous ideal is how to better show the characters and the story rather than tell. I have a very bad tendency to tell instead of show, and I did not want that to happen with my thesis stories. One way I tried to keep that from happening was to adhere to what Hobson says on the subject. He believes that Davidson’s autochthonous ideal can help a writer begin to show instead of tell:

I must also say that his [Davidson’s] point, as concerns the matter of fiction, has some merit. That writer, indeed, suffers as a craftsman, a storyteller, when he is overly concerned with presenting, interpreting, explaining. He tends to tell rather than to show, to focus on southern folkways and idiosyncrasies, on what is distinctive in the region, not what is universal in man. He is in some danger…of dealing in generalities, not particularities as the best fiction writers must. (80)

These five stories in my thesis represent my best effort to show, not tell, and to experiment with different ways of maneuvering a narrative. I have learned a great deal
while writing these stories, and I hope to take that knowledge and further my craft through future writing.
WORKS CITED


CHAPTER II

Mermaid

I didn’t want to go to Coney Island. My boss was the one who had insisted that the island’s Mermaid Parade would provide inspiration for our new ad campaign. Sure, it was a freak show. That’s why I was there, to photograph it. To capture the “essence” of its participants my boss had said. “Find out what makes their little fins tick,” he’d said. I could tell he was serious. He really thought I could design a better ad by taking a few photographs of people parading around in the harsh June heat, studying their personalities, habits. He wanted me to see the sun having its way with their costume-encased bodies, watch the sweat seep down their scales.

I had only been to Coney Island once. The lost grandeur of the place had depressed me. Its shores once hummed with activity; its amusement park was once gorged with thrill seekers. Now, the almost empty island looked liked those thrill seekers of old: blistered and withered, yet hungry and yearning for more. The subtle anticipation of the island—as if at any minute the masses would return, restoring its glory days—made me feel lonely, like I should go home, call friends and family.

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I had been assigned to design the campaign for a new perfume called WAVE. WAVE would be a new summer perfume for the next year, meant to capture the spirit of long, hot summer days spent lazily on breezy beaches. The creators of the perfume
wanted a glamorous campaign that appealed to a woman’s desire to attract the opposite sex. “Who better,” they’d said, “than the irresistible and mysterious mermaid?” My boss, Bob, loved the idea. I rolled my eyes and was thankful that my job performance was gauged by my graphic design and not my ability to create an ad campaign. Going all the way to Coney Island to view a bunch of drunk people dressed as mermaids didn’t seem like the best way to go about designing, but Bob had insisted that photos from the internet or our archives would not suffice.

We needed this account, he had said. I knew the economy wasn’t too great. The headlines told the story: “Can the mid 90’s rebound the decade?” “The economy hits decade low.” And I could hear the desperation in Bob’s repetitive orders to me. He wanted me to wow the client with the most original and authentic design possible. “You need to get up close and personal, Karen,” he’d said. “See the sweat on their brow. See the size of their scales. The color of their fins. We want this ad to make the client think customers will say ‘I can’t leave the store without buying WAVE perfume.’”

The island reminded me of how I used to feel when I was a teenager and visited my Aunt Susan in Jackson. My parents would make the long haul to central Mississippi from the hills of eastern Tennessee in the summers just so that I could stay with my Aunt, who had never married. She insisted on dragging me downtown every night, catching a meal at The Elite, and then requiring me to listen as she talked about her working days downtown at Lamar Life. Driving downtown, looking at the shells of abandoned buildings and the decaying infrastructure of the once thriving area, made my stomach feel weighed down; I don’t deal well with misspent potential. Just seeing the streetlights
change from green to red at night, casting shadows on the empty buildings, made me quiet and unresponsive to my Aunt, who never noticed and kept right on talking.

I had thought of those buildings in downtown Jackson when I first visited Coney Island, seeing it as one big shell of an abandoned building. Now, faced with returning to the island, I knew there was no arguing with Bob when he thought he was right. I knew, also, that if I didn’t go, he would declare that he did not like one design I showed him. My goal was to go the parade, snap a few pics, eat a hotdog at Nathan’s World Famous Hotdogs, and then design whatever I wanted. Originality can’t be forced; it can’t be copied. Then it’s not original, Bob. What can you do with those MBA types?

* 

The day of the parade was unusually hot for June in New York. I had to drag my friend Kat from work with me. Since she would be working under me on the ad campaign, she needed to endure the trip. She wasn’t wasting a Saturday on some crazy parade on Coney Island of all places. Only after I’d lured her with the hopes of seeing celebrities crowned as the year’s King Neptune and Queen Mermaid did she agree to go. Since she and her roommate had started keeping a list of celebrity sightings, she had become determined to out-celebrity her roommate. Topping her list were Helen Hunt, whom she’d seen at the Chelsea market in an elevator; Sean Connery walking on East 72nd Street in front of a grocery store; and Candace Bergen, whom she’d stood by at the Whitney Museum while they watched some lady break the world record for not blinking. “How do you prove these sightings?” I had asked.
“It’s all in the details. You have to provide concrete evidence. How could you not believe the Candace Bergen blinking eye thing? You can’t make up stuff that good.”

Kat had insisted that, if she came, we had to ride the Cyclone roller coaster. She said that if I was going to drag her all the way out to Coney Island, we were at least going to do something fun, something that would take the edge off. I was saying good-bye to my twenties, and I did not want to. I’m not sure why the idea of turning thirty loomed so large in my brain, knocking around in there, nagging and prodding. But the idea attached itself to my synapses and refused to let go.

We took the N subway train onto the island. The air conditioned air in our car felt cool against our skin as we both coated ourselves in sunscreen lotion, taking advantage of the almost empty train to stretch out and cover every portion of our legs, goose bumps popping up once the lotion touched our skin. Our car screeched on the tracks, and the lights flickered as the train sped ahead. I knew we were almost there when the train emerged from the tunnel into daylight and started to slow down. Tracks on either side of us held stationary trains, causing the place to look isolated. “Are you sure we shouldn’t have gotten off sooner?” Kat said. “This place looks barren.”

“We’re reaching the end.”

“What do you mean? We’re not at the end. We just got to the island.”

“I mean the end of the city.”

“What city? What are you talking about?”

“New York City.”
“Look, wherever we are, the end or the beginning, just tell me we are almost there.”

Some parts of the island did look rather dismal. There was a ride at the park that caused a melancholy reaction, and it me to look at it, as if all the island’s loneliness was encapsulated there. It was the parachute jump, a beacon that heralded the island’s prime and beckoned thrill seekers. A free fall is all the thing was; riders went from top to bottom in a matter of seconds. Its elaborate steel architecture loomed in the background of the main portion of the park, demanding attention, soaring above the island’s beach, the vast Atlantic its dark backdrop. I felt sick to my stomach, even nervous. But the kind of nervousness that’s caused by fear, like when you’re scared of heights and you look down at the ground from atop a high building and the uneasy feeling in your stomach soaks down all the way to your calves. This kind of fear, for some reason, made me think I was always going to be alone, like my Aunt Susan. The ride was one of the longstanding reminders of the island’s missing splendor.

Our exit was two stops away, and I started loading the film into my 35 mm. The leather strap of the camera stuck to my neck as I loaded in a thirty-six exposure of black and white film. Working in the art department had allowed me to learn all about the merits of black and white film as well as filtering and something Johnny liked called the Zone System. Johnny was a photographer in the department who loved black and white photographs. He said they had more soul, more feeling. According to Johnny, a good photograph had no beginning, no ending, just the now. Reach out and touch it, and it would ripple, like water. He said you realize the self through the camera’s framing of
reality, as if the camera breaks through the plane of self, unzips it for you, allows a sneak peek.

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The parade had already started by the time we found a good spot. Many more onlookers than I had expected crowded both sides of Surf Avenue, cheering while floats of mermaids, Neptunes, and various sea-dwelling creatures slowly passed by. Sweat began to roll down our arms and necks, causing a white film of sunscreen lotion to cake in rows of little beads as the sun beat down. Elaborate handmade mermaid costumes with sequined fins and sheer tops only scarcely—and sometimes not at all—covered the sea creatures’ breasts. Just about every Neptune used only a trident and a tiny Speedo bathing suit as costuming.

“Why didn’t you tell me this parade was going to be so sexy?” Kat said. “We could have brought a group of our friends and chased guys around all day.”

“I told you this whole thing was like a tribute or something to the island’s old Mardi Gras parades.”

“What does a mermaid have to do with Mardi Gras?”

“I’m not really sure. Maybe it’s because mermaids show their breasts a lot.”

“Did you snap that Neptune up there riding in the blue car?”

“Oh, yes. Twice.”

Sounds of trombones, trumpets, and drums filled the parade route and energized the crowd. Cheers grew louder as the marching band played a jazz tune, causing the crowd to join in a second-line dance.
“Here’s your Mardi Gras,” I said to Kat, who then danced down the street, following a float of Neptunes and sea horses. That’s when I saw the float carrying a mermaid wearing the most gorgeous costume I had seen all day. The marching band’s hoopla made me think that perhaps she was the Queen Mermaid. She had such a regal look about her, as she sat perched high on a cliff of faux rocks, the wind blowing her golden blonde hair away from her face. All of the other mermaids wore fins of bright sequins in red, royal blue, or purple. This mermaid’s fin, though, was a light pink, almost salmon, color and nearly transparent. Her skin was fair and her pale pink, sheer bodice looked like it was a part of her. I snapped pictures of her from every angle, knowing the best thing about this mermaid—the thing I knew Bob would love the most—was that, through her fin, you could see her makeshift cliff of rocks with faux water splashing on them. I knew then that through my mermaid’s fin was where the logo for WAVE would appear, representing how our own essence is intertwined with our ability to allure. That’s how I would pitch it to Bob, anyway. He loved touchy, feely language.

Kat reappeared as I changed out my film. “I’m starving,” I said. “How about a hot dog? I think I’ve got about all the pictures I need.”

“Karen,” Kat said. “Queen Latifah is the Queen Mermaid this year. Can you believe it? Please tell me you have lots of film. How much more evidence will my roommate need than an actual picture?”

“Isn’t she an old news rap star?” I said.

“Karen, she is a big star. Stop being so stuck-up. Have a little fun with this celebrity citing game. Queen Latifah will knock Candace Bergen off the top of my list.
One of the parade directors just told me she’s about five minutes away from making her entrance.” All I could think about was my pink mermaid. I didn’t care about a washed-up rap star.

I took a couple of pictures just to capture the fun of the day. Johnny had told me how he would do the same thing—take pictures of the crazy things—especially on Times Square, just a block or so from our building at work. He said he was trying to perfect the Zone, an exposure system used for black and white film, created by the photographer Ansel Adams, who Johnny had studied in college. After work he would show me some of his photographs he thought to be especially good, all with varying degrees of exposure—some light and some darker. He tried to explain how he got the picture to look the way he wanted. Apparently, Adams’ Zone exposure system uses a camera’s f/stop to help create a desired effect: light, dark, or differing shades of gray. Johnny had used his camera to show me how to decrease the exposure to produce a darker tone and increase the exposure to produce a lighter tone. When I tried this with my own camera, my shots never looked like I wanted them to. They were all always too fuzzy, like there was a constant haze in all of my photos. I wished Johnny was there to take a picture of my mermaid. I would love a good black and white of her.

A couple of jelly fish and star fish walked by, trying to untangle themselves from a fishnet with the help of parade goers who had decided to join in the parade. I snapped a picture of them, as I did the tugboat being pulled by a truck. A marching band with a drill team approached. I thought the tuba players deserved to be immortalized on film since they had to carry such a heavy instrument around in the heat. The piccolo players
needed some attention as well, the unsung heroes of the marching band. Snap. As did the random guys from the crowd who had picked up tridents off the street and joined the parade, becoming impromptu drum majors, pumping their tridents in the air to the beat. Snap. I admired their lack of pretense and began to take more pics of those I wanted to be like, cut and paste my own reality.

A voice from the PA system then echoed throughout the crowd, announcing the arrival of King Neptune—some guy we had never heard of—and Queen Mermaid, Queen Latifah. Kat clapped and cheered with the rest of crowd, begging me to take her picture when she walked along the side of the Queen’s float. “You can’t just hop in the parade with Queen Latifah,” I said.

“Why not? I don’t think any of these people will mind. Live a little, Karen.”

“We are the Champions” blared over the speakers, the crowd’s roar matching the volume of the song. I could barely hear Kat as she yelled, “Wait until I’m walking by the float and wave at you until you take the picture.”

Kat looked like she was part of the parade, wearing a fishnet that she tore a hole in to go over her head, and an abandoned green mermaid fin she had found while chasing after the Neptunes. Queen Latifah’s entourage slowly passed by us, and Kat eased into the flow of mermaids and Neptunes walking next to her float. She was near the back of the float, so when she waved and I snapped a couple of pictures, Queen Latifah, on her stately throne, was sitting in the background, waving, in an elbow, elbow, wrist, wrist, wrist manner, her long red mermaid fin draping over the side of her throne. This is why I love parades. They give people a reason to act crazy, drop their guard, without worrying
about the consequences. Where else would it have been acceptable or even allowed for my friend Kat to just jump in right next to a celebrity? A parade lets you act like you otherwise would not. You can be anyone you want. I took another picture.

“Did you take it?” Kat ran up to me yelling, sweat darkening her orange tank-top.

“Several.”

“How great is this place?”

I stared at her now ripped fishnet hanging off her shoulder. “Can I borrow your fishnet for a minute?”

We walked down Surf Avenue until we found the float with the pink mermaid on it slowly making its way toward the beach and the end of the parade route. The pink mermaid was still on her faux cliff of rocks, making me think of all the pictures I’d seen of mermaids, trying to lure a mortal man back to the sea by combing her golden hair and singing some melodious tune. This mermaid, though, was singing “We Are The Champions.” It’s when I saw her singing that I wished I had brought some color film. I would have to reverse my design plan, mix things up, live a little. I would have to use the color of this mermaid, and the details would have to come from my imagination. This mermaid’s color was natural, so fleshy looking that she caused me to transcend the myth, just for a second. It’s in that second, Bob would say, a customer pulls WAVE off the shelf and purchases it. I only knew that I had to get this design right, for me. Reach my own potential.

The float had come to its final stop, allowing the riders to descend and march to the beach. My pink mermaid began trying to unhook her fin from the rock and Kat
yelled, “Hey, beautiful mermaid,” and she looked up. With my half-torn fishnet covering the upper part of my body, I waved at the camera and Kat snapped. When I turned to express my appreciation for the pic, the mermaid was bending down, still trying to unhook her fin. Her hair parted to the side as she pulled at the wire attached to the rock, revealing strands of wiry, gray hair that flopped about. Wrinkled leathery brown skin revealed several age spots on her hands. I trotted away toward Kat instead of speaking to the mermaid, not wanting to crush my mental design I had of her as magical, immortal. “Kat, do you think we’ll be that sexy at her age?” I said, counting how many more exposures I had left on my camera.

“I know I will. It’s all a state of mind, Karen. Why are you so worried?”

“I want the allure that all those mermaids had. How do you have that in your thirties? That confidence.”

“You gotta let yourself go, girl,” Kat said. “And stop worrying about getting old. Thirty is not old.”

“It feels like it.”

“Men like sassy, self-assured women. Not women who are scared of turning thirty.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Denial is certainly not sexy.”

The crowd began to gather and walk toward the beach where the King and Queen were going. The salty smell of the sea and the sweet aroma of funnel cakes drifting in from stands on the boardwalk collided in the thick, hot air, making us hungry. Nathan’s
World Famous Hot Dogs had too long of a line, so we each settled for a bag of Funyuns and a Nu-Grape from a convenience store. I sucks the salt from each Funyun ring until it was soft with hardly any onion taste left and began to mentally lay out my design, imagining how grand the mermaid must feel sitting up high on her rock, ready to lure in her choice mortal. That feeling is what I wanted to convey in my ad. I needed to get back to the city and go to work.

Kat caught a glimpse of Queen Latifah on the Boardwalk, and as if she was being lured in by a mythological mermaid to the sea, she floated off toward the water. “Kat, I thought we were ready to head home,” I said. Funyun crumbs caked on my fingers. I licked them as I ran after her.

The Boardwalk was packed with half-dressed mermaids—who had, by that time, lost either part of their fins or their bodice—sunburned sea horses and sweaty Neptunes. I could have sat on a bench for hours and just watched the people go by. Kat, though, dragged me toward the north part of the Boardwalk, where the King and Queen were ceremoniously cutting ribbons, officially opening the beach and ocean for the summer. “Look at Queen Latifah,” Kat said. “She has such a commanding presence, regardless of the mermaid get-up. She’s beautiful as is.” Queen Latifah was a tall woman with brown eyes and a sparkling smile, her dark skin glistening in the sun. “Please take a picture of her. Look how great with the ocean behind her. She looks like one of those mermaids in books.”

“Can we go now?” I asked. “I really need to go back and get on my computer.”
“Are you kidding me? This is where the fun is,” Kat said. I positioned myself with my back against the parachute jump. “Maybe we can pick up a few Neptunes to help us usher in the summer.”

“Are you kidding me? My Neptune picking up days are over.”

“Karen, you’re turning thirty, not ninety. What’s your problem?”

I looked around at all of the young mermaids prancing around, things jiggling that were supposed to, things not jiggling that weren’t supposed to.

“I feel ancient, Kat.”

“C’mon, let’s walk right into that group of guys over there.” She pulled me onto the Boardwalk.

“Wait. Let’s sit.”

“C’mon, let’s go.”

“No,” I said. We found a bench to rest on that faced a karaoke stand. A group of teens sang “Hey, Jude.” I watched the Cyclone in the background attack the curves on its track as if it was mad at its passengers and trying to rid itself of them. “OK, Kat, you’re right. I don’t want to turn thirty. It seems like such a sad age.”

“I reached my thirties two years ago. I’ve never had so much fun.”

“I know I’m being ridiculous. I just can’t shake it.”

Kat could tell that I didn’t want to talk. We sat on in the bench in silence, Kat staring at the Neptunes now singing “Stayin’ Alive” at the karaoke stand. I watched the different groups of people walk by, shading their eyes from the relentless sun. Shadows appeared on the boardwalk, shadows that would be perfect to shoot for someone who
knew the Zone System. If Johnny were there I would have had him take my picture in the shadows and adjust his f/stop to seven or eight so that my face would appear light, wrinkle free, age anonymous.

I had often wished that I could adjust an f/stop in real life, make things turn out like I want them to, tweak it until it was just right. I was used to drawing, designing an imaginary world that operated just like I needed it to. If I had my way, I would design a world where I could live in the shadows, where I could wither away with age in private.

“C’mon, forget the ribbon cutting,” Kat said. “Forget the Neptunes. We’re getting in line for the Cyclone before the line gets too long. It’s just what you need.” Kat had been forced to ride a roller-coaster when she freaked out about turning twenty-five. She said she screamed the fear right out of herself. “We forget how to act young,” she said.

“I have a confession,” I said as the line for the Cyclone shortened. “I’m not scared to ride this. Will this little experiment work without fear?”

“It’s OK. You can be scared.”

“I’m not lying. I’m really not scared. I love roller coasters, especially this one. It’s a classic.”

“Hell no, it won’t work. That’s the whole point. It’s probably bad luck or against the rites of passage rules or something if you’re not scared.”

A row of empty cars rolled up, a bar to each popped up, and we stood there staring as if we really were afraid to ride. I had to wait as a group of kids ran by me to get in the car they wanted and then I turned to leave. Kat looked as dejected as one of the
kids who was turned away because he was too short to ride the coaster as she sat in a car by herself, determined to ride the coaster since she had waited in line.

The rejected little blond-haired kid with shorts that reached almost to his knees looked like he might cry as he walked down the ramp with me. I got my camera out of my bag to take a shot of the Cyclone sign. A pic to remember some of the few things I had conquered in my lifetime, a fear of heights and roller coasters.

I could hear the cars full of screaming kids slowly pull away, the wheels creaking against the metal tracks. The cars started the long climb to the top of the first hill, and I began to feel that little nervous tick in my stomach that you feel just before a coaster plunges down that first steep hill. The wheels then slowed, indicating the big drop was not far away. I zoomed in on the cars just before the bottom fell out, the kids with their hands in the air, their own rites of passage before them, and snapped a pic just before they fell.

Kat looked triumphant and refreshed when she exited the ramp. “Those rides get me every time,” she said. “I still get scared. But that’s what makes it so worth it.” She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and smiled at two guys walking past who had sat behind her on the ride. “Even on a roller coaster men are still chasing behind me.” I tried to manage a smile. “Let’s get you out of here,” she said. “You’re depressing me.”

“Kat, I’ve got another confession.”

“If you say you’ve decided you want to ride the coaster, I’ll kill you.”

“I feel like I’ve lost my touch,” I said. “Men don’t chase after me anymore. What is wrong with me?”
“What do you mean? There’s nothing wrong with you. You’re so sure a man won’t look at you that you refuse to flirt.”

“Flirting makes me nervous.”

“What does the thought of rejection do to you?”

“I’m not sure. I think it makes me feel sad and lonely. And, oh, like I want to throw up.”

“OK. This is good. Keep going.”

“It depresses me.”

“Why?” Kat said.

“It makes me think the splendor is gone. It’s stupid, I know. The whole thing is driving me crazy.”

“Then think of yourself as someone else. Like you say you do when you design your ads. You place yourself into your design. So imagine you’re a twenty-year-old. And flirt your heart out. That pink mermaid of yours had to be fifty. But she acted like she was twenty. I didn’t see a Neptune turning away from her. She had her choice of men.”

“She’s immortal, right.” I smiled.

“See, what’s she got to lose? It’s not going to kill her to flirt.”

The view from where we stood also offered a nice panoramic shot of the amusement park, the beach, and the ocean. Looking through the camera, trying to frame the best shot, the parachute jump came into view in the far right side of the lens. I moved to the left so that it would not appear in the picture but then moved back to get a quick
look at it again, thinking how striking it looked from that angle. I could see its detailed, ornamental metal works adorning its top, adding character not melancholy to the shores.

It appeared more splendid than depressing since, from that direction, it looked like a sentry keeping watch over the island, protecting it from infiltration of anything commercial or corporate, which inundated Manhattan. Only the fun and freaky were allowed on Coney Island.

I guess this is the reason we build. To herald. To cry out: hey, here’s my potential. We don’t think about what we’ll do with all these buildings, buildings that will end up neglected, abandoned. It’s only about saying, hey, look what I can do. I had been guilty myself of doing some abandoning a long time ago. I had spent my time constructing my career and abandoning relationships. Now I was one big empty building with only a shiny façade of a career to show for my efforts. I kept the parachute jump in focus.

The sun was beginning to drop under the horizon of the choppy Atlantic; parade-goers slowly walked toward the subway, dragging their costumes along with them. Kat and I followed and tried to find an empty subway car so that we could relax on the long trip back to the city. We looked rather shoddy with fishnet still dangling from around our necks, our disheveled hair, sunburned faces, parched lips, our white film of sunscreen still caked on parts of our arms.

At the next stop, a group of guys wearing red bowling shirts got onto our car, waking everyone in our section. They walked to the back and then decided to search elsewhere for a seat. With their bowling bags cradled in their arms as they walked by,
they waved to Kat and me. We waved back. Our own mini-parade. “Who are they supposed to be?” the tall guy said to the guy in front of him, continuing to look at us and wave. “Some new type of mermaid?” I continued to wave as well. What did I have to lose?

Just before the car door closed a blue-finned mermaid jumped onto the car, holding up her fin, and plopped down across from us. Her fin spilled over into the aisle. The air conditioned air soaked our parched skin, and the car soon quieted as everyone began drowsing. After a couple of stops, I mustered up enough energy to snap a picture of the blue mermaid as she slept. Her diamond-shaped scales glistened in the sunlight that seeped through the windows and exposed us all to full light.
CHAPTER III
Singapore With Space

After my most recent incident on the subway—my third in two months—Richard and Alice Chen had worked hard to include me in their day-to-day activities. I was sitting with them in their apartment, helping to analyze Richard’s Feng Shui design of the living room furniture. This was his newest space-saving technique. Richard said he thought I would appreciate the design aspect.

The sun had just begun to make a showing from the East Side of town; the clamor of the morning rush was still hours away. Only the footsteps of a few early dwellers echoed off the sidewalks and the cobblestone streets. It was one of the quietest times in this part of raucous Greenwich Village, a time I usually sat on my stoop with a steaming cup of coffee and marveled at the city while it seemed to sigh as if gearing up for the day. This day, though, I watched the orange blaze of the early morning summer sun illuminate Perry Street from Richard and Alice’s living room. We were waiting to pick up our rental car and leave for Hyde Park. Alice and I were amazed at how adept Richard was at manipulating their tiny space, which occupied the bottom floor of our building, one floor down from my own apartment.

“Alice says she loves the new design,” Richard said to me. “I tell her we can put it back if she wants.”
“I tell him over and over we’ll keep it,” Alice said. “No way could I go back to the old design now. This way we have so much more space. And I feel like I can breathe better in here now.”

I had always liked being in their apartment, even when it was cramped. It made me feel like I wasn’t in the city and had managed to escape the fast-paced chaos. The chaos I had experienced the week before had put me on edge. I got onto the subway—the C train—at the Thirty-Fourth Street stop. When I walked past a group of guys who were seated with their legs stretched out into the aisle, I accidentally tripped on one guy’s foot.

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. I didn’t look at him. Staying with the flow of people getting onto the train, I kept on moving and walked to the back part of the car to find a seat. By the time we reached Forty-Second Street, the next stop, the guy had started yelling at me from his seat.

“Yeah, that’s right, bitch,” he’d said. “I’m talking to you. Why do you think you can just walk all over me and not stop to apologize? Whatcha gonna do about it?”

I was reading a book. No one on the train moved or said a word. I kept staring at the pages. “Who do you think you are, whore?” he continued to yell. “That’s right. You just stomped on me. What do you think this is?”

I could hardly grasp what was happening, and I couldn’t believe that no one seemed to notice what was going on. By this time we were at the Fifty-Second Street stop. I was going to Eighty-Sixth Street, but at the next stop, I waited until the doors almost closed to get off the train. As I walked down the crowded platform, I heard the shouting continue. The guys were walking behind me.
“Where do you think you’re going, bitch?”

I’m not sure if anger or insanity caused me to turn around, but whatever the reason, it worked. “Look,” I yelled. “I’m not looking for a confrontation.” They all seemed to be caught off guard by the word “confrontation,” and they stopped walking toward me. “I did not step on your foot on purpose,” I said. “So please leave me alone.” I’m still not sure why they walked away. All I know is that when I got on another train headed toward Eighty-Sixth Street, my hands were still shaking as I tried to read my book.

A week later I sat in Richard and Alice’s newly designed apartment, and I felt ashamed that I had let something like that group of guys get to me. I was embarrassed that I was going to Hyde Park just so that I could get out of the city and far away from subway trains and shouting. I needed calm. Richard thought all I needed was Feng Shui in my life.

The main goal of Feng Shui, an ancient Chinese way of decorating and design, is to insure a good flow of Ch’i, a life force energy that flows through the Earth. Richard’s sister in Singapore had introduced him to the basic principles. He did more research and found that the greatest impact of Ch’i is accomplished by placing a home’s contents using a ba-gua, an eight-sided diagram that indicates the power of a given direction such as east or west. Richard explained to me that the placement of contents is determined by overlaying a diagram of the ba-gua on a map of each room. Aligning the map with the wall that holds the door provides optimal achievement of Ch’i.

“So, why did you move some of your pictures to the west wall?” I said.
“Each side of the diagram represents a direction and each direction corresponds with a certain life element,” he said. “To promote activity in a certain area, just determine the direction that suits your need. West represents family. That’s why I hung pictures of Alice and me there.”

“Which way represents well-being or safety?” I said.

“East,” Richard said. He paused and looked around the room. “You could put a plant in the east part of your living room to encourage growth in that area.”

The idea of Feng Shui and its positive life force energy appealed to me. Richard had encouraged me to try it in my apartment.

Richard had done many things to try and please Alice since she had returned from a trip home to Singapore. He had been anxious, thinking that she might want to move back since she had never been really happy in New York. Alice had told me she could tell from their phone conversations while she was away that he was upset. We both expected him to discuss his concern when she returned, but we did not expect him to welcome her back by transforming the design of their apartment. Yet, there we sat, each in a comfortable club chair that Richard had arranged. The back of the couch no longer faced the entry to the apartment. Gone were the wooden chest that served as a coffee table and took up most of the living room floor space, the small club chair that did not fit into its big corner, and the stacks of magazines piled sporadically throughout the room. Now, the couch was against the far wall, facing west, with two club chairs curved in to the right and one chair curved in to the left. He’d centered the end table under the window and placed a plant and coffee table books about architecture on top of it. The
new design almost made the room look twice as big as before. Alice sat in a club chair facing north, Richard faced northwest, and I faced southwest. I felt as if Richard had carved out a new dimension of space, one that was much more comfortable.

Richard was an architect and was used to operating with ample real estate, adding and removing space as necessary in his designs for Smith and Turner, a prominent firm in lower Manhattan. I designed ads for an advertising agency. Richard rearranged space with woods, metals, nuts, bolts. I rearranged text, images, and photographs on a computer screen. But our small apartments and the chaotic city posed a peculiar problem for both of us. We had no flexibility. And we couldn’t design ourselves out of either situation. As a designer, I needed order.

The problem with life in the city was that it caused time and space to morph into almost unrecognizable aspects of day-to-day living. That’s how the three of us saw it. Time operated differently and space looked different. This confusion is what seemed to drive people to commit crazy acts on the subway like shouting and starting fights. It was as if you had to become a master craftsman when you moved to the city and cobble out extra time to get to the subway or the bus on time; cobble out extra dimensions of space just so that you had somewhere for a sock drawer.

Richard, Alice, and I had debated the topic, even before my encounter on the train. Can you actually make more time? Don’t you really just rearrange things? These are the questions the three of us had discussed from their once cramped living room. “When people take the express train to save time, isn’t that the same concept as moving a couch from the middle of the room to the far wall, rearranging, saving space?” I would
argue. “You can’t create space when you have none—as in, say, an apartment building,” Alice would add. “You maneuver things, try things from different angles to create the illusion of more space,” Richard explained. This maneuvering is the trade at which we had worked diligently, but none of us had been very successful at maneuvering in the small space we were allotted. That’s why I had to get out of the city, go to Hyde Park, and be in an environment that didn’t induce outrageous behavior.

Once a woman waved a butcher knife at me on the E train while she shouted over and over, “I ain’t going to jail.”

And the next time involved me sitting down on the A train only to find that the next seat over was full of shit. Human excrent. Poop. Any name you call it, it was disgusting. I felt like that was someone’s way of saying, “Here’s what I think this city is full of.”

I had to get out.

*

The West Side Highway seemed eerily vacant, even for an early Friday morning, as we sped up its almost empty lanes toward Yonkers, headed for Hyde Park in our gray rental Chrysler Seabring, changing lanes from left to right at will.

“Richard, please slow down,” Alice said. She was sitting in the backseat so she wouldn’t get car sick. I was in the front and turned to give her a quick grin, knowing she was going to say something about Richard’s driving. Her eyes were moving quickly through the pages of her latest book she was reading, a biography of Harry Truman. She
worked at the Greenwich Village Historical Preservation Society and loved to read about history, especially U.S. history.

“The road is not crowded,” he said. “I’m not even going that fast.”

“I don’t care,” she said. I could hear her flipping a page in her book. “These drivers are crazy people.”

Alice hated the fast-paced driving in New York; Richard hated the train. They both said the transportation system in Singapore seemed much safer than New York’s. They had lived in the city for almost a year and neither one of them had yet mastered riding in a taxi without getting a queasy stomach.

They were both native to Singapore and had moved to the city two weeks before I did. We met by sitting out on our stoop and griping about our small apartments, while drinking wine and eating cashews, something Richard and Alice always had plenty of. They thought Singapore was cramped. I was a native of Millsport, Tennessee. Only after living in New York City for a few weeks did we realize how silly we had been. One thing we were right about was time: in the city there was little of it and there was no such thing as creating an illusion of more. The city couldn’t hold all the time it had and especially not any extra. We had decided this was why so many people who lived in the city were rude.

When we ate dinner at either my place or theirs, after having a dessert like Richard’s lemon pound cake or Alice’s tiramisu, conversation usually drifted to the topic of time: no time for shopping, no time for exercising, no time for leisure. By our third bottle of wine we were usually blaming the city for all types of injustices. As the city
performed other maintenance duties like trash pick-up and snow blowing, we decided it performed the same type of maintenance with time. We concluded the city must be sucking up time, vacuum style, depositing it somewhere like New Jersey.

We decided that Times Square, where I worked, must be the epicenter of all this activity, this time vacuum. In the winter, when I left my building after work it was always dark. When I crossed Broadway at Seventh Avenue and Forty-Second, I felt like I was walking into a gigantic processing plant, steam rising from underground through the tall orange and white cylindrical vents on the street, the square lit up with white lights, yellow lights, blinking lights, billboards, marquees. It was a central command center, like a boiler room on an ocean liner, blowing all its extra steam—our time—over to New Jersey.

By the end of these drunken discussions, we determined the only way to have time was to steal it from other parts of the day. I could, though, sometimes feel the pump of the city’s suction, like a heartbeat, as I sat on my stoop in the mornings after these late night talks, watching the steam from my coffee waft in the wake of the early morning.

Alice and I had taken off work—stolen time from our work day—to join Richard on his weekly trip to oversee a project his firm had been working on for months. Richard’s firm was renovating Franklin Roosevelt’s presidential library in Hyde Park, a major undertaking for the firm and for Richard. Alice was proud of his work, beaming when he would talk about his involvement and all the politicians and dignitaries that would be present at the site dedication.
I think Alice was also glad that someone would be in the car with Richard on the return trip, a time he said he would usually worry about the laborious tasks at Hyde Park and stress himself out thinking about what was yet to be done in such a short amount of time. Alice had said it was during these stressful episodes that Richard had to get off the highway and recover. He usually stopped at places like Target or Cosco, places we didn’t have in the city, and shopped until he felt better, filling up the car with things like economy-sized packages of toilet paper and paper towels, boxes of cereal, pastas, cake mix, cans of vegetables, sauces, soups, and mounds of cookies and candy—Oreos, Chips Ahoy, Snickers, Twix, M&Ms, anything chocolate. “He’s driving me crazy,” Alice had said to me one day when Richard came home with an especially big load. “Our apartment is about to burst as it is. I don’t know where he thinks we’re going to put all of this stuff.”

She explained Richard’s fondness for closed-in spaces. He had served in Singapore’s army when he was only eighteen and was terrified by military action. Government regulations required young men to serve at least one year in the army. Richard had served his time by training in the clammy, hazardous jungles of Thailand. He was assigned to the mechanized infantry, and Alice said this helped because he felt safe in the tank’s confined inner shell, enclosed by armor, as if there was no room for danger to occur. Now, when he got stressed, he reverted to his army days.

“People do strange things to overcome stress,” I said. “When I get stressed, I have to design my way out of it.”

“What?”
“If I can design things on a page that stress me out or things I don’t understand, I feel better.”

“Do you mean mentally design it?”

“Sometimes. Or sometimes I have to actually put it on a page.”

“You and Richard are funny,” she said. “You do what you have to do, I guess. I just wish he would stop shopping.”

This trip Richard had promised to stay away from Target or Cosco. He had even planned a side trip for Alice and me to Val-Kill, Eleanor Roosevelt’s home, while he met with the contractors at the library. “You’ll both love Val-Kill,” he’d said. “It is so peaceful you’ll weep. It will be just what you both need to take your mind off the commotion of the city.”

The Seabring glided smoothly up I-95 through towns like Plantersville and the famed Sleepy Hollow, on through Potter’s Creek and up to Poughkeepsie. It was in Poughkeepsie that Richard fumbled through the console we had filled with CDs and pulled out Puccini’s “La Boheme,” a favorite of ours, one that we all loved to sing at a boisterous volume, as if we were on stage, singing to a receptive crowd who soaked up our every note. “La Boheme” was as familiar to me as a loved one’s voice and provided the same comforts—strength, encouragement, enlightenment. The first few stanzas resounded into the rental as we made our way up through the last stretch to Hyde Park. I stared at the ashen clouds lining the expanse of the sky, rearranging my own bits of time. I liked to think of the city as I did when I first moved there—as a haven from my boring life in Tennessee, not as a place with rude, crazy people, carrying butcher knives.
One of my first outings with Richard and Alice last year—before I had encountered any subway trouble—was to Central Park. It was dusk by the time we had reached the park, and the Great Lawn, to the left of the stage, was almost full of people. A wind from the east blew as we found a spot, facing the stage, to put down our blankets, our backs to the mid-town Manhattan skyline that glimmered with what looked like a pink halo as the sun began its final descent. A colorful schematic of other blankets surrounded us, each confining its occupants to its square boundaries, displaying spreads of wines, cheeses, and fruits, the chosen dinner of the masses. We were all there to see the Metropolitan Opera’s free summer concert presentation of Puccini’s “La Bohème.” The closeness on the Great Lawn seemed quite natural; it felt better to experience such a musical extravaganza while close to other people, to feel their energy gained from the exquisite sounds resonating from the stage. I was glad there was a time when boundaries didn’t matter, when shared space was a good thing and you wanted to be near people instead of flee from them.

“I really love this park,” Alice had said, looking out over the Great Lawn. We began to unload our meal of cashews, brie and crackers, wine and M&Ms.

“It’s one of my favorite parts of the city,” I said.

“It reminds me a lot of Singapore but with much more space,” she said.

“Really?” Richard asked.

“Oh, yes, all of its greenery with the trees and shrubs, its hills of rocks spread about, and the city rising around it all. It’s like home. Just with more space.”
I could tell Richard’s mind was working in hyper-drive, trying to decide how to capitalize on this information. He looked like he was concentrating hard on solving a geometrical design problem.

We had arrived early and talked for almost an hour before the performance, playing some type of drinking game where we were supposed to share our biggest fears. Alice and I weren’t really sure. This was Richard’s idea, his way of getting Alice to open up as he told me later. He was paranoid, scared Alice wasn’t happy in the city, that she might want to go back to Singapore where they had been married two months before, that she might leave him like his mom had left his dad. Richard’s way was to address the problem indirectly and make Alice feel comfortable in her surroundings. He thought I could help since I too wasn’t happy, having just moved to the city.

“You start,” he said, gesturing toward me. He poured my glass full of red wine. “You have to talk until your glass is empty.” Alice looked down at our blanket, moving her eyes from side to side as if to see if anyone but me had noticed how embarrassed she was. I couldn’t think of what to say, and we sat in silence for several seconds until Alice blurted out, “Richard is afraid of riding on a train. Like the Amtrak.”

“What?” Richard said. “Alice, what are you talking about?”

“Well, you are,” she said.

“Yes, but it’s Karen’s turn.”

“Richard, you’re making Karen uncomfortable.” She took a drink of her wine. “For some reason,” she continued, “Richard gets very stressed if he has to ride on this type of train. He doesn’t like to travel at such a fast pace with no way to stop. ‘What if
we derail,’ he says to me. ‘What if we can’t stop when we reach our station,’ he says. I
tell him to read the paper when he’s on the train. He says this doesn’t work. I worry
about him on days he has to take the train to Hyde Park instead of a car.” Richard smiled
at her. “I told him the next time he has to take the train he should try sitting in one of the
front cars. I’m sure this would help. He’s been like this since we were in college.” The
two of them had met at The University of Virginia where Richard was in Architecture
School and Alice studied History. They said both of their parents insisted that they get an
education in the U.S but were not happy that they decided to stay, especially when they
adopted their new, more American names.

Alice took another sip of her drink. “Some American food scares me,” she said,
looking at Richard to see how he reacted. He looked very content to listen to her explain.
“I do not like all this food you have in cans. Everything is in cans here. Pasta with a
meat sauce. Chicken. Fish. Last week Richard brought home cheese in a can that you
have to squirt to get out. This is not natural, Karen.”

“It is a strange concept,” I said. “I don’t like it either.”

“Fresh seafood is my favorite,” she said. “Not fish in a can.”

“I try to eat as much fresh food as possible,” I said. “But I am afraid that I eat too
many processed things. Like Twinkies.” Alice laughed. “How terrible is that?” I said.

“Richard loves those Oreos,” she said. “He likes to take them apart. Scrape the
white stuff off. Then place one big pile of it in between the two chocolate cookies.”
Richard playfully pulled at his shirt as if his stomach was growing bigger and bigger.
“I do like those goldfish that come in the little white bag,” she said. “They’re like crackers but cheesy tasting.” Richard laughed and reached over to give her a quick kiss. Alice quickly looked down at the blanket again, repeatedly pulling her thick black hair away from her face as if not sure what else to do with herself.

“I’m scared I’m going to get mugged,” I said.

“What!” Richard and Alice both spoke at the same time.

“You hear about it happening all the time,” I said.

“You just have to be careful,” Richard said.

“I know,” I said. “But my family in Tennessee is convinced that I’m going to get killed up here.”

“It’s a risk you take living in any city,” Richard said. “You’ll be fine, Karen.”

The breezy July night had finally developed as the sky started to reveal its map of the constellations. Warm-up scales and musical phrases from the orchestra began to spill onto the Great Lawn, causing the volume level of the crowd to drop a few notches.

Listening to opera while looking around at such a grand setting made me feel like I was listening to a soundtrack while watching movie clips—the white orchestra shell that projects the sound from the stage, the purple hue radiating from the flood lights, the expansive green lawn encompassed by thickets of trees and shrubs, the laughter of people lying on their blankets, the clinking of wine glasses, the sharp smell of the fresh cut grass, the candles lighting some of the patches of space, the glowing grand skyline serving as a backdrop, all of it a salve that soothed my weary spirit, healed my beleaguered body. By
the time it was over, we all looked as if we had just weathered a summer night’s thunderstorm, drenched by the melodious sounds, yet refreshed, lively.

The next week after the opera, Alice knocked on my apartment door.

“I hear that Brooklyn is frying those Twinkies. We must go.”

A friend at work had told her about a place in Brooklyn that deep-fried Twinkies. We all made it an outing since none of us had been to Brooklyn before. By the end of the fall, finally learning how to steal time more successfully, we had been to Flushing to see Andre Agassi try to defend his U.S. Open championship, to Roosevelt Island for fresh lobster, over to Staten Island for Italian food, and up to the Bronx to visit the new pandas at the zoo. In December, thumbing through the *New York Times*, I saw an ad for the annual chocolate show downtown, starting us on a tour of the island that took us from one end to the other: Tribeca for sushi, Chinatown for the Chinese New Year’s parade, Little Italy for gelato at Ferrara, Soho for the Angelica, Chelsea for martinis at Commune, mid-town for Gotham Book mart, the Upper West for brunch, the Upper East for Bloomingdale’s, Harlem for jazz, and Fort Tryon Park for the Cloisters to seek solace from it all. Two months. One big city. We were pros. We knew the city’s schedule—subways, trains, trams, taxis, ferries, buses. All were no longer a mystery, an obstacle between us and where we wanted to go. We could distinguish parts of the city by their sounds, smells, crowds. We knew the shortest routes, the most vacant trains, the quickest buses: explorers charting new territory. By the end of our first year in New York, we had spread out in the city as far as we could. We had designed our own way in the city,
pressed it out like putty, rounding off the corners, smoothing the edges, until we had the
shape desired: one that was spacious.

This was just before Alice left for her trip home to Singapore; just before my
subway incidents and just before Richard began to get paranoid that she would never be
happy with the city. The excitement of our new pro status was overshadowed by
Richard’s uneasiness. It was all he could talk about.

“What makes you think she’s not happy here,” I said. Richard and I were outside
our building, digging around in its small square patch of earth, trying to salvage the rose
bushes the guy in 3B had pruned too much.

“Well, she’s been asking about our future plans.”

“What’s the problem with that?” I said. We both glared at the guy in 3B when
we heard him come whistling down the steps on the stoop and onto Perry Street.

“I love it here. I don’t want to leave.” He wiped potting soil off his brow and
sighed. “I promised Alice we would leave after a year if she didn’t like it. I just came
here to get work experience. Now I want to stay. I know she’ll go home and her family
will convince her to leave. Don’t you love it here? Aren’t you beginning to feel more
comfortable here?”

“Yes,” I said. Richard stopped his digging. “I feel much more comfortable here,
especially after exploring the entire city. And I love you guys. And my other friends.
And my job. And I’ve started dating here, which has been great.”

“But,” Richard said.
“But,” I said, “that’s my life. And you love your life here. But if Alice isn’t happy then that’s her decision. We can’t impose our happiness onto her.”

*

Now, some pop song was oozing through the Sebring’s speakers. Alice was asleep with her book askew on her chest. Richard sang the words to every verse, and I relished the countryside as we entered Hyde Park. Before we went to the library or to Val-Kill, we visited FDR’s home place, Springwood, where he spent his childhood and periodic years as a married man with his wife, Eleanor, and his mother, Sarah. I wasn’t prepared for how grand the grounds and the house would be, its palatial white columns curving at the entryway, its brownish-gray stone façade with light green shutters adorning all the windows of the three-story structure, and a wooded front yard almost the size of two blocks in the Village. Richard took a picture of me and Alice as we waved, leaning against the white, columned railing that stretched across the length of the house. She said she couldn’t imagine living in such a big place, especially considering that she and Richard shared all of six hundred and fifty square feet.

As we toured the inside of the house, we spent extra time in FDR’s study where his wooden wheel chair sat adjacent to his desk. When we reached the opposite end of the first floor, the tour guide explained how a shaft used by the servants to lift cumbersome items to the second and third floors was converted into a makeshift elevator after FDR was stricken with polio. The servants would hoist him up the shaft in his chair to the upper floors, where the bedrooms were located, using a rope pulley.
The guide ushered the group upstairs and Richard looked at her like she was insane. “Excuse me,” Richard said to her. “Did they ever consider building an alternative route?”

The guide looked as perplexed as Richard and shrugged her shoulders. “No. Don’t think so.” The group continued upstairs.

Richard stuck his head inside the shaft, looking up and all around, studying it very carefully. “Hmmm,” he said to Alice and me. “I never would’ve thought it.”

“Don’t ever let me complain again about walking up the two flights of stairs to my apartment,” I said. “This is crazy.”

“That’s some clever use of space,” Richard said.

* 

The presidential library was not far from the house. We first toured the renovation of the welcome center that Richard was overseeing, all wearing white hard hats. Alice and I laughed at the way that hats made our heads look oblong. The contractors had several questions for Richard, but he first showed us blueprints of the new wing that would house FDR’s documents and letters. He also showed us the design for the new atrium, computerized kiosks and user-friendly electronic maps for the library and the grounds. The grounds included the burial site of FDR and Eleanor, marked by a simple white, marble block with their names centered in big block letters, two small American flags stuck in the ground on both sides and a wide expanse of green yard behind it, a fence of trees surrounding. The property also had more recent parts of history such as pieces of the Berlin wall, cut out in tall, large artful shapes to resemble a person.
“I focused on this president in my college studies,” Alice said, as we surveyed the landscape behind the library close to the headstone. “He had lots of what Richard would call fortitude.” Richard smiled. “I studied Eleanor, too. She had what Richard would call resilience. They both did a lot for your country.” Richard gripped his rolled up blueprints, crinkling them, when he heard her say “your country,” as if she didn’t live in it. Many times I had told Richard that I would not intervene in Alice’s decision to stay or go back to Singapore. I left so the two of them could be alone and went to study the people cut out of the Berlin wall.

*

Val-Kill was not far from the library. FDR had encouraged Mrs. Roosevelt to have her own space, a retreat from the demanding political spotlight that she often found herself in the middle of. She developed the property at Val-Kill, and it eventually became her home after FDR died. Richard gave us directions, and when we reached the sign for the house, Alice and I took turns having our picture taken in front of it, acting like we were on a long-awaited vacation.

The grounds were bigger than we expected, even after listening to Richard’s description. A gift shop, which once served as one of the two main houses for the property, sat on a hill overlooking a pond with ducks who waddled down the lawn to take a dip in the water, the stone cottage house reflecting in the ripples. Before we toured the other main house, the one where Mrs. Roosevelt lived, we watched a short video, explaining the life and work of Eleanor, emphasizing her work done to help draft the
Declaration of Human Rights. I imagined that Mrs. Roosevelt would have much more sympathy than I did for the person who left the A train seat in such a mess.

A tour guide took our group through the second house, a two-story stone cottage with a library, living room, dining area, and a screened-in back porch with built-in seating accompanied by blue cushions aligning the walls. Touring everything but the upstairs, we were given a detailed account of the day-to-day life in the house. It was in the library, though, that I was perplexed by a name plate that sat on the desk. The name read “Elenor Roosevelt” without an “a” in Eleanor.

“Why in the world would she have a name plate with her own named misspelled,” I whispered to Alice as the tour guide continued to talk to our group. Alice quickly raised her hand, always eager to learn more about historical figures.

“Why is the ‘a’ missing in Eleanor’s name plate?” she asked.

The guide smiled and said, “It was a gift. Ms. Roosevelt didn’t have the heart to not use it or point out the misspelling. So she kept it as is.”

“That solves that mystery,” Alice whispered to me. We were both enthralled with the place as if it were some ancient ruin that had just been discovered and put on display.

When we toured the dining area, the coziness of the room drew my attention. There was no pretense, no formality. It was a small room and its walls were wooden and paneled with a wide thick groove. The centerpiece of the room, the table, was small, wooden and oval shaped with four matching wooden chairs. Set just as Mrs. Roosevelt would have had it, the table had several little figurines from around the world in the center and four place settings of china, each topped off with a small water glass like you
would see at a diner. To the side of the table, along the wall, were fold-out wooden chairs that were used during parties. I imagined many a late night cup of coffee was shared in this room with Eleanor and her friends, and I could just hear the laughter that must have filled the room.

The guide said Mrs. Roosevelt had entertained such dignitaries as Presidents of the United States, foreign diplomats, and delegates to the United Nations. I couldn’t imagine them sitting in the wooden fold-out chairs in a stone cottage, talking to a woman who was too nice to change her name plate but seemed to be as shrewd a politician as they come. The guide said that Val-Kill was the first home that Mrs. Roosevelt had ever owned. It was the only place that she felt comfortable and free to enjoy herself. She was forty-two when she acquired it. And she would always refer to it as home for the rest of her life. I couldn’t imagine that the group of shouters on the C train or the crazy butcher knife woman on the E train would ever feel the need to behave as they had in a place like Val-Kill. I imagine they would probably feel as calm as I did.

* 

On the way back to Manhattan, we stopped just outside of Hyde Park at a diner decorated in a fifties era theme, all of us eyeing the sign that read, “Home of the best banana split from here to the Catskills.” The diner called a large banana split an Earthquake. We divided one into three parts while Alice recounted our trip to Val-Kill.

“Richard, I could not believe this place,” she said. “The grounds are so beautiful with ponds and ducks and trees.” I took advantage of Alice talking and not eating and ate my portion and almost half of hers.
“Richarrrrd,” Alice said in a voice she used when she wanted him to do something for her but hated to ask. “Why don’t you design us a place like Val-Kill? You know it’s not that fancy. We could have ducks and trees and land and Karen could use the guest house anytime she wanted.”

“Oh, we would have a guest house?” Richard said, spooning out the last of the melting strawberry ice cream like it was soup.

“No, no, no,” she said. “Just one cottage would be fine. Plus the ducks and trees and land. Just space, Richard. A place where we’re not so cramped. Like a weekend retreat they call it.”

“Karen, I think your guest house just got the axe,” Richard said, laughing.

Alice almost hopped in her seat. “It would be so great to have the city during the week and place to stretch on the weekends.” Richard just smiled at her and shook his head.

“She’s quite the planner, this one,” Richard said pointing to Alice. “What am I going to do with her, Karen?”

“I like the version with the guest house,” I said, smiling.

Alice went to the restroom before we left, and I put in a quarter at the mini juke box on our table that played songs on the main speakers in the diner. Roy Orbison’s “Pretty Woman” blared throughout the place.

“She cracks me up,” Richard said, after Alice left.

“Richard, I really think she’s serious.”
“Oh, I know she’s serious. I know the city is suffocating her. That’s why I’ve already talked to my boss about a weekend place near his at Woodstock. It’s one reason why I wanted her to see Val-Kill.”

“What!”

“Working at Hyde Park has really given me a lot of freedom,” he said. He started on his scoop of chocolate ice cream, which he had saved for last. “I’ve been able to open up my designs, re-think architecture in a way not possible in the city. I’m beginning to feel more free now. I’ve worked past some issues. It’s crazy. Then my boss said there’s a place for sale not far from him that has a barn and an apple orchard. An apple orchard. Can you believe it? I think I would love that. And Alice will go nuts.”

“Richard, this is perfect. When are you going to tell her?”

“I’d planned on telling her about it next week. The people who own it aren’t officially putting it up for sale until then. I thought maybe she could come back up with me next week to see it. I just found out about it yesterday.”

“So what about your designs?”

“I really want to do more commercial design now instead of residential. I studied a lot of Gehry for this project in Hyde Park. He’s been on the cutting edge for years, re-ordering architecture, looking at things so differently. Things you would never imagine appropriate for a space explode with creativity in his designs. He does things with geometry you wouldn’t think possible. And he’s just been commissioned to design the Guggenheim Bilbao, which I can’t wait to see. He’s inspired me. I’m hoping to start showing my commercial work around and try to get more offers.”
“I think you just bought yourself more time to do that with this weekend place. I don’t think Alice will even mention the topic of moving.”

“I hope. I think she’ll love it.”

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By the time we got close to home, it was almost seven o’clock, and the traffic on the West Side Highway was getting heavy, especially in the northbound lane, everyone heading out of the city for the weekend. I knew Richard and Alice would soon be some of those people heading north on the weekends, too, away to rearrange their own space, their new way of living.

When we started heading down out of Yonkers, Alice had just woken up from a nap and Richard was discussing the schedule for the rest of the library renovation. We topped a hill, leading into a long straightaway on the highway, and saw police lights blinking up ahead on the right side of the road. Traffic had slowed and a few cars had pulled over. Two police officers were standing in front of their car, looking at the wreck in front of them. It looked like a mini-van had side-swiped a Ford Taurus. One of the police officers waved his hands in the air. By this time, the sun was just beginning to set, and the glare off the Hudson River cast strange shadows onto the highway. We couldn’t tell if he wanted our lane to stop or slow down, so we pulled over. Other cars pulled over behind us. One cop called for an ambulance while the other ran to the side of the highway, trying to direct traffic around the wreck. We had officially entered the chaos again.

“This must have just happened,” Richard said.
We knew to stay out of the way. The cops were so busy trying to control the situation they didn’t notice us or the other bystanders who just wanted to help. After we’d been standing there a few minutes, trying to decide if we should go, Alice pointed to the mini-van. Two little brown Yorkshire Terriers ran out of a broken window in the van and ran in circles around the Taurus and all over the scene, not sure where to go or what to do.

“We’ve got to get them,” Alice said.

“We just need to stay back,” Richard said. “I think they’ve got everything under control here. We should probably go and try to get around this mess.”

“But these people need help,” Alice said.

“Alice, we can’t move them,” he said. “The cops are waiting on the ambulance. They will take care of them.”

“But what about the little doggies?” she said.

About that time one of the cops yelled, “Watch out.” A hose under the hood of the mini-van popped, making a loud hissing noise. The little Yorkies barked with all the might they could muster.

“Come here, little doggies,” Alice said, bending down and patting her knees. “Here, little doggies.” The dogs continued running around, the huge highway making them look very small as they scurried about. When they took a break out of what seemed like exhaustion, Alice would call to them again. One finally came close to her and the other followed. Soon she was holding one and I had the other, one with a little pink bow on its head and the other with a red. We held them and walked over to the sidewalk.
along the Hudson and talked nonsense, like you do with dogs, until a couple of ambulances came and provided us blankets to wrap them in. The driver of the mini-van had cuts and bruises and a broken leg; we never heard about the Taurus passengers. They were quickly lifted into an ambulance and driven away. The mini-van driver left in an ambulance and the Yorkies rode in a police car behind her, standing up in the passenger window of the police car, tails wagging.

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We drove home in silence, each of us apparently still awestruck with what we had just encountered, each retreating to our own rooms of thought. I was stressed and wanted to think of anything other than car wrecks and ambulances and began to concentrate on the images that floated around in my head—the elevator shaft, the piece of the Berlin Wall, the stone cottage, the Yorkies on the highway—determining how I would design those on a page. When I designed at work, I usually looked for differences and similarities in the items. This was how I saw it: the differences—presidents sit in the Oval Office, they don’t dangle by a rope in an elevator shaft; concrete walls are erected in eastern Europe, not upstate New York; stone cottage retreats are for aristocratic family vacations, not foreign policy negotiations; Yorkies scamper around on the living room floor, not the middle of the West Side Highway. The one similarity—none of them fit into their given space. None of them belonged there, yet they still managed to operate successfully. I could work with that.

When we reached our apartment building, the sun was slowly beginning to slip under the horizon that was level with the West Side Highway, causing Perry Street to
glow as if lit by a raging fire. I walked up the stairs to my apartment, thinking about FDR and the elevator shaft, and I could hear Richard continue to comfort Alice about the wreck as they stood in the foyer, checking their mailbox. I thought about the group of guys who shouted at me on the train, the woman waving her knife, and the person who left the seat filled with excrement. In their own way, they all seemed to force order into a crazy world. And in the end, they all had succumbed to the chaos.

Through my apartment window I watched as the streets of the Village began to fill up, making the place always seem smaller as the night progressed. I kept watching until the sun disappeared. Shadows from the streetlights fell on my living room across the couch and coffee table, over my red club chair and ottoman. I thought about Richard’s Feng Shui ba-gua. The ba-gua superimposed on that small, dark room would indicate a lack of many life elements. I was comforted to think that for years the ancient Chinese had been whispering through the tunnel of time about life force energy and directional influences. Their voices had echoed again and again, over the once undeveloped island that first became known as Manhatta, over the Dutch colony that grew and became New Amsterdam, over the British Colony that grew and became New York, over the cobblestone streets that grew and became Greenwich Village, my little patch of space. Those voices had spread with the city and even they could only go as far as its reach. All I could do was press and stretch within the city’s limits as well and let those soothing voices wash over me again and again.
That winter was unusually cold, even for the Northeast. Every morning as I tossed in my bed, I could tell how much snow had fallen the night before just by listening to how long the super scraped his wide black shovel against the sidewalk in front of my apartment building, a daily ritual for him until at least the end of February. It was the first week in December, though, when I received a call from a Ms. Miller, the assistant principal at P.S. 132, a public high school up on 110th street. My sister Margaret was on day two of her supposed five-day visit, and I was on week four of being unemployed.

“You’re going to interview where?” Margaret said, after I got off my cell phone with Ms. Miller. We were walking down Fifth Avenue in front of Bergdorf Goodman near Fifty-Seven Street, catching the full force of the wind that took advantage of the space offered by the wide mouth of Central Park up the street. We had just left the Plaza Hotel where we’d had a late lunch and a couple of martinis. Margaret’s face looked chapped, cold, tired.

“It’s a high school in Spanish Harlem.”

“Have you lost your mind? Isn’t it dangerous up there?”

“Up there? It’s not that far from my apartment.”
“Well, it seems like it’s the end of the line. And it seems like it would be dangerous.”

The whole situation was really quite ridiculous. I had never taught a day in my life; I don’t know why I thought I could waltz into this school and all of a sudden possess super teaching skills, but for some reason I did think just that. That I would be good at it. That I would love my job. That all would be right and good and I wouldn’t have to find another job in the crazy world of advertising.

I had wanted to teach for quite some time. When I was in high school, I took one of those skills based tests that they give around your junior year. It said I should be a librarian. I wanted to teach books, not stamp due dates in them.

I had lived in the city for almost three years. Laid off from Cooker & Roberts, I’d been thinking about returning to Tennessee. But that year, due to a lack of teachers, the State of New York had begun issuing emergency teaching certificates to people with a college degree. A toss-up, indeed: P.S. 132 or Millsport, Tennesse.

“Sure, it’s not the safest place in the city,” I said. “But it’s really not that bad.” I pushed the revolving door that spewed us into the store, trying to believe my own words.

“Just be careful, Karen,” Margaret said, making her way to the leather purses. “This is the very reason you need to come back to Tennessee. I can get you a job. Did I tell you that I’m very close friends with the editor of Nashville magazine?” She didn’t wait for my response; the appeal of the purses captivated her. I sat on a bench in the wool scarf section and started making notes for the next day while she perused rows of black and brown leather.
Margaret lived in Millsport, where we grew up, with her husband Carter and had never been to New York. Even though the city was one solid sheet of ice and so cold that even the rats in the subway had packed it up and convoyed south, Margaret was determined to make the trip because I had said I might soon move home. She said she’d thought of moving to New York herself after she’d graduated college. On her first trip she wanted to experience day-to-day city life with someone who lived there. I guess she wanted to see if things were as grand as she thought, and also, as I learned from my Aunt Helen, she had been designated as the family member most likely to convince me to move home—a distinction Margaret wore with pride.

I had been a victim of the mid 90s corporate downsizing. When the whole craze began, it took only three months for me to get the word. I was a graphic designer, and I was good. Or so I was told. As an undergrad English major, I had spent more time drawing the scenes in the books than reading them. Something about the allure of inanimate objects eased the blow of having to navigate my way to adulthood. I preferred to loom on the outskirts of a situation, circle it, like a vulture in the hills of Millsport until things were safe.

My favorite scenes to draw were from Margaret Atwood’s books *Cat’s Eye* and *The Edible Woman*, and especially *The Handmaid’s Tale*; I couldn’t resist the handmaidens with their swooped, pointy-edged white hats and long red capes. Color is what attracted me to drawing, color that you could add, lighten, enhance, whatever was needed to enliven the blank slate. I’d thought of Tennessee as a kind of blank slate—too
much space and void of color, especially in bland Millsport. It needed to be shaped, more colorful. That’s what I did in my mind’s eye as a kid, added in color to the hills, tucked in the corners. This translated quite well onto a blank page. Margaret hated that I was good at something.

*

The second night of Margaret’s visit she wanted to stay in. I think she’d had enough of trying to determine if New York was all that grand. All I could get out of her was that it was cold. And because of the cold, nothing had seemed to go our way that day. Trying to find an empty taxi was a waste of time. We missed getting tickets to Broadway plays or musicals because we didn’t order ahead of time, and we didn’t want to stand outside and freeze in the cheap ticket line. Our idea of getting a walking tour of the city was spoiled by the banks of snow pushed up on the sidewalks and curbs, a maze of white frozen walls cemented by black slush. And then this night, the one night we stay in, I find a poster taped to my front door saying to conserve as much energy as possible due to the brown-out declared by the city.

“What the hell’s a brown-out?” Margaret said.

“Great. This is just what we need,” I said, ripping the sign off. “All I know is that salt the city pours on the sidewalk to give traction gets all over the exposed electrical lines and causes problems. It’s a mess. We’re supposed to use something like only one or two electrical outlets at a time. The same thing happened in November. I sat in the dark for three days.”
“What!” Margaret plopped herself on my bed, which basically took up all the space in the “sitting room” of my tiny three-hundred and fifty square foot apartment. “Are we going to freeze?”

“Why don’t you overreact a little, Margaret.” I placed our pizza we’d just picked up from Pizza Bob’s on the counter. “Yes, the building won’t run as much heat. Just throw on an extra pair of socks, get under a blanket, and we’ll watch TV in the dark. We’ll be fine.”

Later on that night, though, I felt like I was one who had started to overreact. We sat in the dark and Margaret watched the Brooks and Dunn Christmas special on TV the best she could, considering that I didn’t have cable and the images got a little fuzzy at times. I guess it didn’t matter, but it was sometimes hard to tell which one was Brooks and which one was Dunn. I sat in my club chair and used a flashlight to review my notes I had made on *Of Mice and Men*, the book Ms. Miller had said she wanted me to teach for about fifteen or twenty minutes.

It wasn’t hard, I didn’t think, to feel sorry for myself in a situation like this. There I was, the younger sister, trying to impress my older sister with my glamorous life in the big city when, in reality, I was just about to turn twenty-nine, I was broke, living on unemployment insurance with supplements from my savings, desperate for a job that I was excited about interviewing at a school known for its major discipline problems, and reading a book I hadn’t read since junior high in order to prepare. I think the full impact of my self-pity really hit when I looked over at Margaret and she had pizza sauce running down the middle of her white sweat shirt. We made a sad pair.
And then I thought about her suitcase that I had tripped over earlier when she was in the shower. She’d thought a hot shower might help to insulate her, and I looked for as many blankets as possible. When I bent down to straighten up the suitcase, I saw her mink throw peeking out from under her sweaters and pants. I realized then that I had badly misjudged her perception of my life. I decided I would take Margaret to the Russian Tea Room for lunch the next day, after my interview. It’s next to Carnegie Hall, so she’d like that. It was swanky enough that she could wear her mink throw, and cheap enough for me to afford to buy lunch.

Brooks, or maybe it was Dunn, crooned his rendition of “Silent Night” on the TV, and I kept thinking about Margaret wearing her throw. She used to wear that thing out to restaurants in Millsport when we’d go with the family and people would stare, including me. I would sometimes find myself swirling my glass of wine and thinking, “Who’s that woman at our table with that mink on?” She just didn’t look like herself. She looked so out of place next to everyone else in the restaurant who had on the usual slacks, sweater, wool coat. Then she would say something like, “For the love of God, it’s cold enough in here to kill a hog,” and I’d think, “Oh, look everyone, Margaret’s here.”

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I arrived at P.S. 132 early. Each step I took on the white tile floor echoed throughout the long narrow hall that led to Mr. Richard’s office, the office of curriculum and instruction. The thunderous clomping sound made me feel even more apprehensive about our meeting, and I started to tip-toe, which was hard to do in my black high heels. I entered a different way than I had for our first meeting, where we discussed my
education and work experience. With this entrance I got to see more of the school, and I was glad that it looked clean and smelled clean, like it had just been given a good once over with Mop n’ Glo. My high school in Millsport usually smelled like corn chips.

When I reached his office, Mr. Richards looked nervous. He kept doodling on his yellow notepad, fidgeting with his black-framed glasses, and checking at his watch. “Is everything O.K.?” I asked.

“Well,” he said, “Ms. Harris called in sick today. You were supposed to teach in her class. But since she didn’t show up, we had to distribute her students to other classes.” He quickly drew little arrows in the left margin of his notepad as he spoke.

“Just to be honest,” he said, flipping his notepad to the next page, “this happens a lot with our teachers. They’re absent about as much as the students.” He pushed up his glasses and then stared at the floor.

“Oh,” I said, feeling embarrassed for him but extremely relieved that I didn’t have to teach. I didn’t think I was prepared to handle any discipline situation.

“I thought maybe we could sit in on a few classes so that you can get a feel for the way we operate around here,” he said.

When we walked into the first classroom, I realized just how crazy I was to think I could teach there. Kids were running everywhere. Some ran in from the hall and hid in the closet, while two others ran into the room, looked around for them and then ran out. They were high school kids—girls, boys, black, white, Hispanic—acting like this was the first time they had seen other humans. It was so loud and crowded that it sounded like the protest against the National Hockey League strike I had walked by the week before.
down at Madison Square Garden, only there was no one to control this crowd or, at least, no one who would try. Mr. Richards and I sat in the corner. If Margaret could see this, she would laugh him out the door.

* 

Margaret has even less patience than I do, especially for disorder, which means she doesn’t have much patience with me since I can be quite awkward and clumsy. She and I get along for the most part, but this occurred after we were older. I think that’s mostly because she is six years older than I, and we never really had to occupy much of the same space after she went to high school. Before then, though, it was guerilla warfare.

Once when we were kids, she had a sleep-over for her little junior high friends. Her best friend Kate was there and so was Allison, Sarah, Janet, and Michelle, all of the girls that I idolized. I’d named my pet baby turtles after them. When I came downstairs to show them my turtle collection, I tripped on the turn of the staircase, sending the box of babies flying through the air. Most of the them landed on the big wool rug in the living room, except for the Kate turtle, which slid on the wooden floor, ricocheted off the wall and into the dining room, dead—either from sheer trauma or a concussion—by the time she rested under the dining room table. I cried. They all laughed. The next morning I woke up and stared at my bedside table, which held a frozen turtle sitting on top of a purple piece of construction paper that read “R.I.P: Karen’s Turtle, April 26, 1978-June 19, 1978.” Her little front claws stuck to the paper when I tried to pick her up, but her back claws had started to thaw, causing a purple stain to form on my table.
because I let the paper stay stuck there for a week. I stayed in bed that morning with her lying on my chest and waited until she thawed so that I could bury her. Margaret and her friends only noticed me when they had the upper hand. They noticed me quite a bit that day.

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The clock on the wall at P.S. 132 read 9:15 am. Class was supposed to start at 9:00. The teacher stood at the front of the classroom, counting to ten, as if that was going to make this group quiet down. One kid finally happened to sit down and be quiet. The teacher said, “Thank you, John. Class, Mr. Walker is sitting down.” Then another would sit. “Class, Miss Clemons is sitting down.” This went on for another ten minutes. I looked at Mr. Richards, who had now added another nervous tick to his already numerous habits. He must have wiped his brow and adjusted his belt at least ten times in a couple of minutes. He leaned over and whispered to me, “This is just the opening routine. They will now begin class.” His superfluous comments sounded like some of the irrelevant things the golf announcers sometimes say just to justify their presence on those TV golf tournaments that Margaret and Carter watch all the time. Margaret would’ve told him so and then walked out. I was too curious to leave at this point.

Class had about ten minutes left, and the teacher was mumbling something about the Middle Ages when a girl sitting at her desk on the left side of the room got up, walked to the other side of the room, pulled a desk up next to some guy, and the two started chatting. Then two girls in the middle of the class started doing the same. Shouts then echoed in the hall. Through the glass window of the classroom door, we could see
several students running by, shouting and screaming. I could tell it was a fight. A tall thin guy in the back of the room with a black t-shirt on that read “I heart bats” got up, walked to the door, and looked out its window.

“If you go out, Jacob, there’s no coming back,” the teacher said, walking to the door. “You’re on your own if you leave.” The kid stared out the window into the hall, looked back at the class, then turned the knob and went out.

I understood his need to go. To leave this current madness that was his classroom for a different kind of madness, a kind that fit him better. This is how I felt when I left Tennessee to come to New York. I wanted to draw the smile on his face when he turned to look at the class. A nice watercolor on linen.

The class carried on their chatting for another fifteen minutes or so while the halls were cleared. Mr. Richards never referred to the incident. He only said that we would visit a Geography class next.

After the same scenario, the kids talking, the teacher counting, the Geography class finally started around 10:20. Mr. Richards and I sat close to the door and listened as the teacher discussed volcanic activity in Asian countries. The teacher was about halfway through discussing Japan when Mr. Richards looked at his watch, clutched his notepad, and then whispered to me, “I’ve got to step out for a minute. I’ll be back.”

I guess I should’ve known with all the craziness of the morning that he wouldn’t be back. This was a different place with a different set of rules. These kids didn’t want to get any further than 110th street, and no one encouraged them to do so. If I were Mr.
Richards, I probably wouldn’t have come back either. When fifteen minutes had passed, and he had not returned, I kept hoping he would walk in at any minute.

The teacher pulled down a map of Japan and pointed to various points up and down its oblong-shaped islands. “What do we have here?” the teacher said, pointing to the top, “the very end of the country” as he called it. The right side of the class was engaged in deep conversation; the other side looked like they were oblivious to the world, except for one guy who sat to the side of me. He had shy eyes, the kind that look at you for a split second and then search for anywhere else. He was the kind of kid that might break into pieces right in front of you if he had to speak to the class. We had exchanged a polite nodding of heads when I sat down, and I could tell he had a kind of dire intelligence about him. I think it was because of the way he clung to his textbooks, as if they were the only things in his life that made sense.

“Oh, look,” the teacher said, as if amusing himself so as to not surrender to the hopeless situation that was his classroom, “I do believe it’s a volcano. It is Mt. Usu. Where could that be?” He tapped the map with his finger. “Here it is.” Tap, tap. “Right here at the very top of the country. Where is it? It’s dying for attention.” Tap. “Whatcha got?”

I heard the shy guy next to me whisper under his breath, “Hokkaido.”

I remembered studying about those volcanoes and Hokkaido. We studied them in one of my history classes when I was not much younger than these kids. I had loved history class because my teacher said that I possessed an excellent quality: patience, a true testament to a real student of history. It was in this class I realized that the country
of Japan is made up of different islands as the teacher discussed the history of World War II. The night of this grand discovery my mom happened to cook rabbit for dinner, and since this menu item seemed to be a special occasion, Margaret invited Kate. In my excitement to impress them I stated, “Today I learned that Japan is not a country but instead is a small island that sits right next to Hawaii. Can I have more rabbit, please?” Kate and Margaret covered their faces with their napkins and laughed until Margaret finally blurted out, “Japan is a country, and it’s not next to Hawaii. It attacked Hawaii, stupid.”

The next morning I awoke in my bed on my side with my right arm stretched across my back and my fingers floating in a bowl of water. I awoke soon enough to see my sister and Kate running out of my room and screamed in a half-cry, half-shout. Margaret stopped in her tracks and said point blank, “We heard it makes you pee in bed.” They both giggled and ran downstairs. I no longer idolized them; I feared them.

The next day in history class our teacher talked about Japan and the hardships the U.S. suffered at the hands of the Japanese. She discussed Pearl Harbor, and we learned about the attacks on all seven of the battleships present that day, especially the Arizona, Nevada, and the ex-battleship, the Utah. We discussed those ships for two weeks. The USS Nevada ended up receiving seven battle stars for her service during the war. And the life of the USS Utah was over only ten minutes after the attacks began. Hearing about the ships and what the people on them endured made me think of the children that the fallen officers left behind. Margaret and Kate said they had studied the Arizona and knew everything about it because it was the hardest hit. I decided to become an expert on
the Nevada and the Utah and complete my World War II project on those battleships instead. I liked knowing things Margaret didn’t. It made me feel smart. Grown up. Like she couldn’t hurt me no matter what she said or did. It was my private arsenal of information that I drew from when needed. Once when Margaret scolded me for borrowing a watch and not specifically returning it to her jewelry box, I sat on my bed as she screamed at me. I thought about all the facts I had learned in my Civics class.

*Tennessee has ninety-five counties. Shelby is the largest; Pickett is the smallest. Tennessee became a state in 1796. We were the sixteenth to join the union.* I knew Margaret didn’t know all that I did about our state. She skipped that class and took P.E. instead.

My teacher also discussed the islands that the U.S. bombed, showed us Nagasaki and Hiroshima on the map, and explained that Japan surrendered after the Hiroshima bomb, after they knew they couldn’t win. I thought of my sister as the enemy and wondered what she would do if I froze my pee and used it as my ammunition to attack her and Kate by pelting them with blocks of it. A soldier in combat is very patient.

*I*

I heard the shy guy next to me whisper again, “Hokkaido.” I wanted to go shake all the kids on the right side of the room out of their conversation and shake all of the kids on the other side into the world and say, “Wake up. Knowledge is in this room. Take it. It’s in this building. It’s on this block, this block that the city forgot. It’s in Spanish Harlem, this part of the city that even sarcasm seems to have forgotten.”
“Yes, that’s right, class,” the teacher said with a smirk. “It’s Hokkaido. Thanks for your participation.”

The kids from the chatty side of the room began to grin, as if in approval of the teacher. “Hey, Mr. Tims,” one of them said to him. “Why do you think those Japanese eat rice all the time? Obviously, they never tried Mama P’s hot tamales up on 116th.”

“I know that’s right,” another kid from the group chimed in. That whole group then started talking about Japanese culture. The other side of the room started disputing them, and Mr. Tims moderated. He looked over to me and acknowledged for the first time that I was even in the room. Only then did I realize that Mr. Richards would not return. I recognize a person with an upper hand as well as one without.

When the bell rang, I nodded to the shy guy and set off in the network of halls to try and find Mr. Richards’ office. After asking a couple of students and a teacher for directions, I found my way to familiar territory and to Mr. Richards’ office door, which was closed. I’ve tried to think back and figure out why I knocked on his door. And I think part of me wanted a confrontation with him, an explanation of why he ditched me in the middle of our so-called interview, and another part wanted to tell him to keep up the fight. That these kids were learning. They were learning in a way that didn’t look like usual learning, but they were learning.

I kept knocking until my knuckles got sore, realizing with every blow, more and more, that I wanted to teach. There was no way I could go back to a cubicle and draw swooping white hats and red capes and call it representative of life. Education,
knowledge, learning. That was real life. I guess I kept on knocking, hoping that someone would answer and tell me that that was OK.

I later found my way to Ms. Miller’s office, but I didn’t ask about Mr. Richards. I felt like it was my first step in understanding what it meant to be a teacher: Discretion is your best friend. From my bag I pulled out the copies of *Language Arts, Grammar Skills, 12th Ed.*, and *Of Mice and Men* that Mr. Richards had given me a few days before and asked if she would return them to him.

“Well, I can tell you’re going to be a fine teacher,” Ms. Miller said. I’m not sure why she said this, but I think she knew I needed to hear it. I just wasn’t sure if she meant I would be a fine teacher one day or there at her school. She then thanked me for my time without even asking if I would like to return, as if she knew my answer or, as I thought as I walked down 110th street toward the subway, she knew what my answer should be.

It was this extra dimension of knowledge that she and Mr. Tims seemed to have that I didn’t have. In spite of all the discipline issues, I hadn’t decided if I would return or not until Ms. Miller didn’t ask me to. That school required teachers who knew how to outfit learning in a way that I just wasn’t ready to do. Ms. Miller knew this. It took me four stops on the subway and then another hour to figure it out.

By the time I got back to my apartment, I felt like I had been on a long trip, like a trip overseas where you’re so immersed in a culture that you start thinking it’s more interesting than your own. You spend days wandering around, looking at the architecture, the people, and listening to their language and watching them interact. You think after a while that you could be a part of it, that your old way of life is rudimentary,
predictable. You might just get a work visa and work odd jobs until you find your place in that culture. And then you get on a plane, fly home, and welcome the comforts and security afforded by such small things as your couch in your own tiny apartment. Then you consider eating lunch at the Russian Tea Room as your venture into a new custom.

Margaret had spent her morning several blocks down from my apartment at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When I met her on Lexington and Eighty-Sixth to go to lunch, all she could talk about was the long lines at the coat check.

“No one in this city seems irritated to wait in line,” she said, as we descended the stairs to the subway. “People with a baby stroller and two toddlers crawling all over them seem perfectly content to wait thirty minutes to get their coats. It’s insane. Absolutely insane.” We each inserted our metro card into the slot and waited for the beep and green light. “How do you ever get anywhere on time in this place?”

“I guess you just adapt,” I said, pulling down my navy blue wool hat more securely on my head. We stood on the platform waiting for the six train. Margaret’s hands were red and cracked. I offered my gloves. She had decided the cold was too much for her mink, so she wore her long black wool coat. I told her we could’ve taken a taxi to the restaurant, but she insisted that we travel just as I normally would. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that to get where we were going we had to transfer trains, which meant more lines, more waiting.
“How was your interview, by the way?” she said, holding up my pink, white, and purple plaid gloves against her coat. I guess to see if she thought they matched. They seemed fine to me, colorful. I don’t think she agreed.

The platform echoed with the roar of the incoming train, its breeze causing long coats of passengers to billow in the wind and hands to reach for hats. The idea of explaining my morning to her seemed exhausting. In the bustle of getting on the train and squeezing between passengers for a seat, I only offered, “You’ll be glad to know I won’t be teaching there.” I didn’t think she could handle my explanation of why.

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I’d made reservations the night before for our lunch at the Russian Tea Room and when we walked in, I could tell this was the best decision I’d made since Margaret arrived. The grand spectacle of the place seemed to cause her to radiate when we walked into the main dining room. It was if she had just stepped into every expectation she had had of the city, its promised opulence encapsulated in one room. We were seated and Margaret’s eyes panned the room. She focused on the chandelier in the middle of the room, its crystals sparkling like the lakes down in the southern part of Tennessee when the sun hits them on cold, pristine days. Her attention then turned to the lushly decorated red walls with their long straight rows of landscape paintings dressed in ornate picture frames, an army in their finest regalia ready to defend the honor of the place, their battalion reflecting in the shining silverware garnishing our crisp, white tablecloth. I was glad to see her smile. Maybe all Margaret needed was a little color in her life.
“Mom and Dad would love this place,” she said, opening the tall dark green menu. She flipped a page in her menu, engrossed in the appetizer selections. “You’ll miss places like this when you move back home. I’ve still got to call my editor friend.” The server then stopped to see if we had any questions. “Can you tell me about this crab bisque,” she said. “Do you serve it with a red cream base or brown cream base? I really only like the brown cream base, and I would hate to order something that I didn’t like. The red cream base is just too thick, don’t you think?”

I had always known that Margaret and I did not exactly have much in common. She knew it, too. But I think she enjoyed having someone around who would put up with her high-maintenance personality. She continued to quiz the server, and I began to imagine what she would say if I told her I took that job at P.S. 132 and to celebrate we were going to eat at Mama P’s on 116th. She would clutch her purse the whole time, wipe the seat and the table with a towelette—at least twice—and then keep a close eye on everyone in the place, as if they were all targeting her and the ten dollars in her purse.

Then I imagined if I took her into my chatty classroom. I knew she would walk out and then later on lecture me on the value of my education and how I was squandering it away up here in no man’s land. If the chatty group walked in right now in the middle of her appetizer, the appeal of the place would significantly decrease for her I was sure.

When she kept on and on about how the crab bisque was not as good as she thought it would be, I came very close to telling her that the place was about three more weeks’ worth of bad business away from being closed down just to engage her in conversation. But I don’t enjoy giving generally displeased, extremely negative people
even more to whine about, especially when I knew I would spend the next week financially recovering from the outing. I wanted to enjoy my Prix Fixe $20.00 lunch in peace.

But Margaret seemed intent on not allowing that to happen. When her lamb shanks came, I thought she might not recover when the server informed her there was no barbeque sauce for dipping. “It’s cooked into the meat,” he said.

“How could a restaurant, a place in the business of food, not have extra barbeque sauce lying around,” she said, after the server left, flicking to the side of her plate parts of lamb with no cooked-in sauce. “I mean, c’mon. It’s just a little ketchup and such mixed together. For the love of God, we bathe in the stuff in Tennessee. I’m not asking for too much, do you think?”

I assumed the question was rhetorical but just in case not I busied myself by cutting up my salad and popped a cherry tomato into my mouth for slow chewing so that I would not have to reply. How could she not enjoy some of the best lamb shanks in the city? Now that, to me, was insane, absolutely insane, thirty minute coat check or not.

“Hey,” I said instead, “I was thinking that tomorrow we could go to the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building and maybe the United Nations building. I know you said you wanted to see those places. The view of the city from the Empire State Building is quite astonishing.”

“Good heavens, we would freeze to death,” she said, cradling her coffee cup in her hands. “Don’t worry about it. I’ve been meaning to tell you that I talked to Carter last night, and I’ve decided that I’m going to go home tomorrow instead of the next day. He
says he misses me, and we’ve got so much Christmas shopping to do. And I know you’ve got better things to do than look at the Statue of Liberty.” I knew this was just her polite Southern way of saying she was tired of the cold, tired of waiting in lines, and ready to go home, so I didn’t press the issue.

I do have to admit, though, that I was sad that I wouldn’t get to show her the city from atop the Empire State Building. I had always enjoyed taking visitors there and pointing out things like Central Park, Times Square, Rockefeller Center, my neighborhood and the general area of my apartment. It gave me a rush to think that this was “my” city, the city where I lived, worked (well, worked at one time), played. I really wanted to show Margaret that. I wanted to take her up there and unveil the city to her, as if I were pulling back a heavy, red velvet curtain and showing her my grand prize that I’d won through all of my hard work—my crowning moment. The one moment where I could feel successful and maybe she would be just a little jealous of me.

I looked over to her and she smiled as she took a sip of her coffee, and I realized that I was as silly as her barbecue sauce tirade. I smiled back but not in an “I understand” way but because I realized the city, my grand prize, had beaten me. I had put up a good fight, but in the end, when the bell rang, ending the match, the city was in the winner’s circle.

Our dessert menus arrived and Margaret took one quick look at it and announced that she would have the Galaktoboureko because it sounded the most Russian.
“It’s actually Greek,” I said, still trying to decide between tiramisu and Crème Brule. “It’s custard.” She jerked her menu up so quickly that she knocked her silverware off the table, sending it clanking to the floor, causing heads to turn.

“Of course it’s Russian,” she said, bending down to retrieve her forks, spoon, and knife. Hair in her eyes and face reddened, she said, “It has to be.” She pressed out her white, crinkled napkin in her lap, combed her hair back with her fingers, and looked at her menu again. “The word looks and sounds just as Russian as it can be,” she said, lowering her voice and throwing an “everything is just fine at this table” half-smile to the next table.

“It’s Greek,” I said, puckering my lips to take a sip of my water.

“This is the RUSSIAN Tea Room,” she said, clasping her hands and placing her elbows on the table, as if she had just given the final word in a senate committee hearing.

I pointed out that nothing on the menu was Russian, including tiramisu, which we had just discussed the pleasures of, and that the restaurant was a fine dining restaurant, not a Russian cuisine restaurant. When our server came to take our orders, though, she asked, “Is this Galaktoboureko Russian or Greek?”

“It’s Greek,” he said with a smirk and gathered our menus.

I really hoped that I would have more time to enjoy my small victory, but Margaret was also good at not letting that happen. “OK, good,” she said. “I’ll have that and she’ll have the tiramisu. Just put it all on one bill when you’re ready.” She reached for my menu and handed it to the server while whispering behind it in a not so low voice, “Guess somebody’s gotta take care of the little sis’.”
The next day I went with Margaret to Penn Station to see her off. She had traveled to New York by Amtrak train because the TWA airline crash over Long Island Sound the few months previous had, as she said, “unnerved” her, a decision I refused to comment on. We went to one of Amtrak’s ticket windows, and I helped her process her new ticket. Then we made our way through the frenzy of people to her gate, and I tried to explain how to handle her luggage. “Just get a Red Cap to help you, and you’ll be fine.”

“What the hell’s a Red Cap?” she said, the weight of her overnight bag on her shoulder causing her body to lean right.

“He’s an Amtrak employee. He’ll help you with your carry-on luggage.” I stared at her, thinking this information would probably refresh her memory from when she made her way to Danville and got on the train there.

“And does this person have on a red cap?”

“Well, yeah. Didn’t you use one when you came here?”

“Hell if I know. Carter took care of all that.” I looked at her as she unloaded her overnight bag on the floor and plopped down in one of the chairs, breathing out what I assumed to be a stressful sigh. She observed her surroundings—the crowds of people walking hurriedly by clutching worn, stuffed, briefcases; fast food joints dishing out slices of pizza to go; Red Caps pushing aluminum carts piled high with suitcases—and I realized her face didn’t reflect stress but fear. She pushed so far back into her big gray leather chair that it looked like the chair was swallowing her, like she was slowly being

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eaten alive, deteriorating as if in a bad sci-fi movie. She looked vulnerable and quite content to sit there and succumb, melt away in her misery. “I just want to get my stuff home, for the love of God,” she said.

For the second time that day, I realized just how vulnerable even the most seemingly powerful people are and knew then my sister was too embarrassed to ask me to stick around. Of all people in this fast-paced seemingly uncaring city, I would be the one to ask since I had nothing but time on my hands. So I did what I had wanted to do all day—I asked if I could help. She smiled, and I got up and found us a Red Cap, introduced her to him, and got her luggage on one of those carts, ready for departure.

Her train didn’t leave for another thirty minutes, so I sat with her until she boarded, nervous about mentioning my moving situation, knowing she would be hurtful. “Margaret,” I said finally, just before her train was scheduled to leave, “I’m sure you already know that I’m not moving home anytime soon.” The battleship USS Nevada tried to leave during the attack on Pearl Harbor but then decided to stay after she was hit by torpedoes. She lost sixty crewmembers that day and still continued to serve bravely throughout the war.

“Oh,” she said. “I pretty much figured that one out before I even got here. Then I really knew when you said you were interviewing at that Spanish school.”

“Spanish Harlem school.”

“Wherever.” We watched as steam rose from the engine of the train that had entered the station, indicating her departure. “You know,” she said, “everyone in the
family thinks you’re crazy for staying up here. Absolutely crazy. I think it’s a huge mistake to stay here.”

*Few go to visit the battleship USS Utah during trips to the Pearl Harbor Memorial. It was the one ex-battleship there that day in the harbor, utilized as a target ship, its flag raising just as the first surge of enemy fire hit American shores.*

“By the way,” she said, “I’m telling everyone back home that you found a job.” She wiped her nose with a tissue and acted as if what just came out of her mouth was sane.

“What? Why in the world would you do that?”

“Well,” she said, “I don’t want people to think that I’m incapable of talking you into coming home or that you’re nuts for staying without a job.”

This was the most straightforward Margaret had ever been with me. I then realized this was her version of a call for cease fire. She realized she couldn’t win. This knowledge seemed to yield freedom to let the other rule as she chose, have separate and independent governing bodies.

I walked away from her gate thinking about how that train would soon shoot her toward the familiar and away from New York equipped with white snow and long lines. She wanted to see the city as scarves at Bergdorf’s and martinis at the Plaza, not as Red Caps and brown-outs. And she wanted to see her sister as successful in the big city, not defeated by it. As I ascended on the escalator that led to Thirty-Fourth Street, I thought that Mr. Richards knew what I saw that day at P.S. 132 was just what I needed to see. He never intended to let me teach that day and knew I wasn’t quite ready to spend my days
there at the end of the line. As I breathed in the freezing, gnawing air and the sputtering exhaust from the long line of yellow cabs on Thirty-Fourth Street, I realized that I was ready to accept the outfit of New York but just not quite ready to accept all of its accessories like the students at P.S. 132.

When I had hugged Margaret on the platform before she boarded she said, “All good things must come to an end.”

“Must they,” I said, looking around at the resounding, grand Penn Station, Penn Station that sits right in the middle of the island, a hub for the city, nowhere near the end of the line. “I don’t know that they do, Margaret. Maybe they lose a little gusto from time to time. But I’m not sure that they have to end.”

“Well, this is the end for me. I’m outta here. Nothing personal. I just need to get back to the south so I can thaw.”

I suppose it was the end for her. Guess it always would be. As for me, I realized that I was glad to be there in the middle, in the nucleus, where things positively charge, where things thrive.
CHAPTER V
Wayside Exhibit

During my last lunch in the neighborhood, at The Yellowstone Diner on Second Avenue, we ordered chili-cheese fries, mushroom Swiss burgers, and chocolate milkshakes and thought of all that could possibly go wrong with our plan. My sister Margaret and her husband Carter had made the trip up north from Tennessee to help me move into another apartment across town on the West Side. I had tried to explain my situation, but Carter was still having a hard time understanding my lease agreement.

“Don’t you think your landlord will find you and make you pay?” he said, biting into a fry and catching chili-cheese sauce with his napkin before it hit his khaki shorts, his arm catching slightly on the sticky table. “Why don’t you tell him what you want? This whole thing could backfire on you.”

“All I want is to use my deposit for the last month’s rent. No way he will agree to that.”

The hot July sun poured in through the front windows of the diner, causing us to squint at each other when the light mixed with smoke from the greasy grill. The little bell would ding from the kitchen, signifying a scurry to serve hot, full plates. Burgers sizzled, the grill’s heat turning excess fat to brown gooey liquid that would soon coat my empty stomach, fill me up. Customers chatted over songs that spilled out from the jukebox. Someone had chosen “Born to Run,” and the lyrics to the first verse rushed to my mind.
I stared out the window at the yellow taxis as they sped down Second Avenue, honking cars and roaring city buses in tow, a steady flow of motion, pumping through the veins of streets in the city. The sidewalks were packed with people, weaving in and out of the course of foot traffic, carrying overflowing shopping bags from Saks Fifth Avenue, Prada, Louis Vuitton. The lull of the mid 90s economy had not seemed to affect the buying habits of most New Yorkers, at least not those on the East Side. This was good news for my profession: advertising.

I had been on the East side for almost exactly one year. It was expensive, and I longed for peace and quiet. I’m a Tennessean: from Millsport. There peace and quiet is required. I had not been able to sleep for the yelling of the raucous party-goers who overflowed from the nightlife of Second Avenue. Around twelve or one in the morning, the bars were so crowded that their structures could not hold the masses and the excess spilled onto the window sills. Arms, legs, feet pumped to the rhythm of whatever music blared into the street. By the middle of the night, the clamor would cool to a murmur and the East side would creak and pop like our old wooden house in Millsport. That house popped so loud at night in the winter that its noise rivaled the crackling fire that my father left burning downstairs in the fireplace to warm the drafty house. Those pops and cracks comforted me and caused me to snuggle deeper under my covers. The East side’s cracks and pops kept me awake and only made me feel as if I lived with a stranger who made foreign sleep sounds.

The quieter, less packed West Side beckoned. Margaret had said a clear conscience was sure to cure a sleepless night. I told her my conscience was just fine.
We slurped the last portions of our milkshakes, and I saw my landlord’s infamous limp-walk in the crowd of people across the street; his black hat bobbed up and down among the sea of heads. He turned to walk down Eighty-Fourth Street, and that was our cue. He was early, and I was nervous.

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One way or the other we were determined to get the best of my landlord. We would wait as long as it took to make sure he was not in the apartment building when we crammed full the U-Haul truck and drove away from East Eighty-Fourth Street. Margaret and I would pack up the apartment while Carter would report to us via walkie-talkie from the Laundromat across the street if the old, sly landlord left the building. Carter had picked up the U-Haul that morning and then discreetly parked on First Avenue, the cross street. Everything would be packed up in one day, and we would leave early the next morning.

The reason for this clandestine activity was because I was broke; I had been unemployed for six weeks back in the winter and the East side had been steadily draining me. A few months before I moved out, word in the apartment building had it that Kragen, the old landlord, had stiffed my neighbor of her $1,500 deposit when she moved out. No way could I afford that kind of set-back. I would have to out fox the fox—leave without paying the last month’s rent and let him keep my deposit. Guess I should have known it would eventually come to this. I could tell just by looking at him that he was a scoundrel, a dirty old man.
It was his robe. He had that nasty thing on the first time I met him. A dark green, knee-length terry cloth robe—one of those with a belt at the waist that you tie to make sure nothing peeps out. The thick material was worn thin by the years, and the dark green color was embedded with black and brown grit, grime, and whatever else this old guy had gotten himself into. I would now have to think like a scoundrel and then take advantage of him before he knew what hit him.

It was Brenda, though, the business manager of the building, who first confirmed my suspicions that Kragen was a dirty old man. “He’s an exhibitionist,” she’d said. “Plain and simple. He makes sure everyone in the building sees him. Wearing that skimpy little robe. He loves to show his thighs. It’s embarrassing.”

I liked Brenda, even though just listening to her was exhausting. She was the so-called business manager because Kragen gave her a break on rent for helping him monitor the place when he was out. After observing her comings and goings for a year, I had decided she must be manic. The woman could not stand still. She always had one hand running through her sandy brown, tangled hair as she engaged in conversation, and she somehow managed to whisper louder than most people talk. Even though she had a creepy poster taped to her door with nothing on it but two dark eyes that follow your every movement, I enjoyed visiting her. I wanted to think she was a good egg.

One day, though, about two months before I moved out, she was in hyper-drive. The woman could hardly wait until we got into her apartment to ask about Kragen. “Did you hear what he’s done now?” she said. “And to your poor neighbor of all people.”

I had no idea what she was talking about.
“Svetlana,” she said. “Can you believe he did that to such a sweet girl?”

After she calmed down by drinking a minty-smelling tea, she explained that Svetlana had moved out and Kragen had refused to give back her security deposit. Svetlana had done everything Kragen had asked, but he wouldn’t give her the $1,500. Said he wasn’t going to give it back because he didn’t have to. “Don’t say I said it,” Brenda said, “that Kragen’s as mean as a snake. He’s been pulling this deposit sham for years.”

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After I saw Kragen round the corner onto Eighty-Fourth Street, we paid our bill and put our plan into action, feeling very pleased with ourselves. I had been telling Margaret about Brenda and how she suggested that we pack up on a Saturday, when Kragen was always gone, then drop off the keys to her and leave early the next morning before he returned. We chuckled.

We crossed Second Avenue, heading toward Eighty-Fourth. Carter stopped us at the corner, and we huddled together. “What’s in it for this Brenda?” Carter said. “I thought you said Kragen gives her a break on rent. Why would she be so eager to help us scheme? She would look very good if she kept you from skipping out.”

Margaret was amused at Carter’s paranoia, but I knew he was right. I didn’t want to believe that Brenda was trying to pull one over on us, too. I was tired of believing the worst of people, especially of Brenda—the potentially one good egg. That was one of the main drawbacks of living in a city that only barely functioned properly. People didn’t trust anyone or anything. Millions of people crammed into one tiny island, only twelve
miles long and two miles wide. The city bulged at its seams at about two or three sizes too small, yet everyone walked around acting as if the place was a tailored fit. No one would acknowledge that just one glitch and the whole place could collapse, like a pin prick to a balloon. Everyone lived cynical lives as a result. I was drawn to this insanity, this city with the bright lights and appealing promise.

With Carter staked out at the Laundromat, Margaret and I went to work packing up the last of my things in the apartment that could fit into boxes. Brenda had said Kragen would come home to his apartment around 1:00 in the afternoon, shower and shave, go to the Italian restaurant a couple doors down around 3:00, order out pizza, and then take a taxi to the West Side to see a woman he was trying to flatter.

Just after Margaret and I had started to pack, there was a light tapping noise at the door, so light that we almost didn’t hear it. Through the peep hole, I saw that it was Brenda. She tip-toed in with huge black trash bags and dispersed them around the room on piles of boxes that I had tried to organize according to size. Everything went into the bags. She moved at a swift pace, her arms flapping about, shoving in things here and there, as she slid across the wooden floors in her brown lounge moccasins. “That Kragen is not going to know what hit him,” she whispered, pulling her hair back into a ponytail.

Before I could tease Brenda about whispering —Kragen did live up one flight from me and on the other side of the building— or ask her leading questions about why she was being so helpful, she started talking at her usual fast pace. “He thinks he’s so smart. Prances around here in that damn robe. Grinned from ear to ear when he refused to give that poor Svetlana her deposit.” She stopped packing to adjust stray hairs that had
fallen into her face. “Do you know what he said to me after Svetlana moved out?” I knew not to reply because she hardly took a breath when she started talking fast. “He called us all idiots. Everyone in the building. Even me, after all I’ve done for that man. Looks straight at me and all he sees is an idiot. I’ll show him who’s an idiot.”

I later found random shoes packed in with my toiletries. Towels and boxes of pop-tarts were packed with canisters of tennis balls and cans of chili and all shoved into bags. But sure enough, around 2:45 Kragen went to the Italian restaurant, ordered a pizza, and around 3:15 he got in a taxi that headed west just like Brenda had said. Carter still didn’t trust her, and I was ashamed, but neither did I.

We started loading the U-Haul around thirty minutes after Kragen left. Couch, chairs, table, bed, clothes, black trash bags, every bit of it except a few couch cushions that we left out to sleep on. We locked everything up in the truck and looked at each other. None of us could believe how quickly we had worked. Not one disaster, not one hitch, until I was standing up in the back of the loaded truck yelling down to Carter that we were done. It was then that I saw Kragen’s best friend, who lived two apartments down, come out of the Italian restaurant and walk straight my way. He had fixed a couple of electrical things in my apartment (Kragen wouldn’t do electrical) and he usually sat out on the stoop with Kragen at night. He always seemed to be around, and all he did was stare. The man hardly ever blinked. I’d never seen anything like it. It creeped me out as much as Brenda’s spooky eye poster. There were eyes everywhere in that building. Even the windows on either side of the building looked like eyes, a face staring back at you every time you walked in. Nothing went unnoticed.
So, here was this guy—Kip, I think his name was—walking toward me with his usual stare, carrying a pizza box. He walked right up to the truck, stopped, stared, tipped his Mets baseball hat to me, and walked away.

“Who in the world was that?” asked Carter.

I jumped down from the truck and watched Kip walk up the steps to his building.

“One of Kragen’s crazy-ass friends. I think they were in the military together. Been living here forever. Just like Kragen.”

“That Kragen’s even weirder than you said.”

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Jack Kragen. Mr. Kragen to me because I was too scared of what he would say if I called him Jack. He was the landlord and supervisor of the building and had owned the place for over thirty years. He was a hard-ass. That’s the word I got from everyone in the building when I first moved in. They said just do what he says and everything will be fine. And what he said was to obey his trifecta: 1). “Pay your rent on the first, the first only, and nothing but the first 2). Don’t make any loud noise, including playing music too loud, playing the TV too loud, or playing around with anyone too loud 3). Don’t eat at Pizza Bob’s down the street. It’ll give you the shits. Then I’ll have to unclog your toilet.” Fair enough. I wrote him a $1,500 check for the first month’s rent and then wrote him a deposit check for another $1,500.

A couple of weeks after I had moved in, I came home around nine p.m. to find Kragen sitting outside on the stoop in his house shoes and his robe. He had one skinny pale leg propped up on the step below him and the other outstretched as if he had a
cramp. His knee looked double-jointed and the purplish veins that decorated his lower leg looked three dimensional. He sat expressionless and chewed on a cigar, causing brown spittle to gather in the corners of his mouth. “Hello, Ms. Crawford,” he said. His teeth clicked when he spoke, and he looked as if he was almost chewing on them as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

I smiled and starting walking up the steps, reaching in my bag for my keys.

Over his shoulder he said, “Your neighbor ate at Pizza Bob’s this weekend, and I’ve spent all week at her place plunging her toilet. Even her damn shower is backed up now because God knows what she’s been shoving down her kitchen sink. Her shower had little carrots and such in it.”

I barely comprehended what he said because when I turned around to look at him as he talked, all I could concentrate on was his bare white thigh muscle creeping out from his robe as he turned to talk to me.

Just about every night from around seven o’clock until nine he sat on the stoop with that robe on. He wore the thing constantly around the place—walking the halls, checking his mail, fixing things in apartments—until around October. Then the brisk Northeast wind got the best of him and at least kept him off the stoop in that thing. Instead, he would wear a dress hat and a tweed overcoat. He had nice summer things, too; I would see him on the weekends sitting at the end of our street on the bench next to Pizza Bob’s, looking spiffy with his gray hair combed back, wearing a cream cotton suit and black leather shoes. He wouldn’t wear anything like that around the building. Guess he wanted to torture us all.
One winter day, several months after I had moved in, while Margaret was visiting, my radiator decided to work at only half capacity. After a couple hours of this, I marched up the flight of stairs to Kragen’s third floor apartment, banged on the door, and waited to see his sourpuss face appear. While I waited I stared at the floor, bracing for what I was sure would not be a pleasant encounter, and noticed several small roaches scampering out from underneath his door. I briefly felt sorry for the old guy. I figured his apartment had to be filthy. What little I had seen of the inside looked like he’d not bothered to throw away a newspaper or magazine since the 70s. Just as I was contemplating how disgusting his kitchen must be, he opened the door and screamed at me after I told him about my radiator. How dare I not let him enjoy his dinner hour? Why couldn’t I be more considerate? Before I could even ask him how I was supposed to know that 5:30 was his dinner hour, he slammed the door and yelled, “Put duct tape around your windows!”

Two hours later came a knock at my door. It was Kragen, donned in his finest regalia: the green robe. Margaret was horrified and followed him around the apartment, snatching up her things before he sat on them. He had a habit of just plopping down anywhere as he discussed his topic at hand. This night his topic was my radiator. Margaret kept staring at him, especially at his pale, concave chest, which looked like huge chunks had been chiseled away down to his ribs. After acting like our previous altercation had not happened, he made himself comfortable on my couch, crossed his milky white legs, kicked his crossed leg back and forth like he didn’t have a care in the world, chewed on his cigar, and gave us a breakdown on the inner workings of a radiator. After about twenty minutes, he leaned over, his thigh shining in all of its whiteness,
banged on a few things, gave a few more things a twist, fixed the radiator, and grinned
with satisfaction, as if he was glad to make us wait the two hours. He reached over,
grabbed the corner of his robe, slowly covered the thigh, tightened the belt, and said,
“Good night, ladies.”

Looking back now, I suppose I really wasn’t as mad at him as I was at myself for
living in his building. The building was fine enough looking on the outside. A nice dark
brown color.

“This is such a nice part of the East side,” the broker had said when he showed
me the apartment. “Very social. There’s a bar and restaurant every other building just up
on Second Avenue. You’ll love it.”

The building was a five-story brownstone, and in addition to its eye-like windows
on every floor, it had steps off the sidewalk that led up to green double doors that served
as the entryway. A bountiful green tree planted in front of the sidewalk hung its limbs
over the middle of the building, providing a cooling shade and a lush, welcoming
atmosphere. Two very nice brownstones, each with huge, dark oak front doors, were on
either side of my building, causing me to feel rather good about the block.

I concentrated too much on the outside of the building and only quickly inspected
the inside, forgetting about the creaky wooden floors, the dingy white walls, and the
drafty windows when I signed the lease with the broker. My roommate had just gotten
engaged, so I desperately needed to find a place. I believed every word the broker had
said.
“Don’t the floors look uneven to you?” I had asked the broker before I signed the lease, pointing with my pen to the right side of the room.

“Oh, that’s just the pre-war charm of a brownstone.”

“And what’s with this odd-shaped room in the middle?”

“Oh, that’s a bonus room. You can use it as a sitting area.” I liked the sound of the word bonus, especially for what I had to pay for the place. I took the pen and signed my name twice, once in the middle and once at the bottom, not really giving much more thought to it.

The day I moved in, the rain soaked my furniture and the shoddy movers, who charged me twice what we’d agreed, tracked in clumps of mud. The place looked dirtier when there was no sun shining through the windows, and the wet furniture made the place smell even more musty. My little studio apartment looked very, very sad.

But there was something about the so-called sitting room. It intrigued me. It was a bulge in the middle of the apartment. From the front, the building looked like it would reach all the way back in a straight line to the alley, but it did so only until the middle of the building and this was only visible from the inside. The middle of the apartment was oval shaped, creating the bulge and a crevice between the back part of my apartment and the next building. At first I thought this was great because the window in my bathroom opened up to fresh air, and in the winter, snowflakes would trickle down through the crevice and melt as they hit the wet, black brick of the next building. It was my secret viewing venue that I loved. Then I noticed that the black against the next wall was actually soot that had caked on from years of pollution and that mounds of trash had
collected at the bottom of the crevice. The bulge in the middle also made the dimensions of the room very uneven, not quite big enough to actually use as a sitting room, but too big to leave empty. From my viewpoint inside, the bulge made the building look pregnant.

The boiler for the building was located in the basement and was continuously catching on fire, causing the hot water to work only half the time. I just knew one day it was going to explode and push all of the building’s guts through the canal of the green door as if it could hatch an offspring onto the street.

Margaret had almost finished mopping my dusty wooden floors by the time Carter and I made it back upstairs. I had forgotten how big the place looked when empty.

“Can’t believe you’ve already lived here a year,” Margaret said, starting on the kitchen.

“Well, it’s a year too long.”

“I thought you liked it here,” Carter said. He reached in the fridge for the rest of his lime Gatorade.

“I love the city. Not this nasty apartment.”

“God knows why you like this town,” Margaret said. Carter and I both tried to ignore her when she started on this topic. “At least your apartment isn’t that nasty anymore,” she said. “Kragen can’t say a word, and the brokers who try to lease the place will be happy.”

“I don’t really care what those bastard brokers think.” I had finally found a roll of paper towels and began wetting a sheet to wipe against my face. I opened the closet door
to get another mop to help Margaret. “Those brokers would sell out their own mothers if it would make them a quick buck. They can all go to hell for all I care.” Margaret stopped her mopping and just stared at me. I squirted some Mop – N- Glo in a circle on the kitchen floor and continued mopping. The last thing I wanted to hear again was a lecture on how the city, especially my job, had made me “more aggressive” as she loved to say.

*

I was a graphic designer for an advertising agency. What I designed looked very chic and shiny when the final ad appeared, but the heart of advertising was a farce. At its center, it was polluted and caked with as much lies and deceit as my walls were caked with soot. We deceived people, manipulated them into thinking they couldn’t live without a certain product: “Stylz Now: Get That Uptown Look With Downtown Prices;” “You Can’t Go Wrong With Rite-Way;” “Gotta Getta A Glam Look With Glitz Girls’ Go-Go Lipstick.”

Every day at work was a masquerade, my mask made of dollar signs, a face that said I’m all about designing an ad that will help our bottom line. It really drained me. Day after day of this and soon I felt like no one saw me, just numbers, our net worth.

I’ve often wondered if this feeling of being invisible is why Kragen wore the green robe. I think it was his way of shouting to the world, “Someone notice me for the love of God.” People looked at him and saw nothing but a crumbling old man. He wore that sourpuss scowl, showing every frown line on his face, trying to put up a front that said “I’m tough.” But he wore the robe to show the real Kragen, the person who was
ravaged by loneliness, which had been slowly gnawing away at his concave chest, his skinny white legs, down to the purplish veins. I think I chose to live on the East Side and work in advertising for the same reason Kragen chose to wear the sourpuss scowl. I wanted to say, “Hey, I’m tough. I’m important. Look at me.” I hadn’t been brave enough to have an equivalent to the green robe—actually live somewhere that I could afford and have a job I was proud of. Exposing the real self is hard. I know that’s why I hated the eyes of my building. I’m sure it’s why Kragen never intended to leave. He liked the attention.

Everyone at work, including myself, seemed to have taken on the persona of the ads we created: wow ‘em with quick one liners and a slick, pretty face to pack in the punch. Nothing or no one was real or honest; we were all just like the pages we created—bound in a glossy cover. The fact that I stayed embarrassed me, made me feel like I should hang a vacancy sign and advertise my emptiness to the world. I burned barrels and barrels of energy spinning my wheels, getting nowhere. There was never enough fuel to actually have a life. Just enough to try and survive.

*

Carter, Margaret, and I were all so hot and tired from the move that we decided to go over to Bar 112 on Second Avenue while the floors in the apartment dried. A nice breeze blew through the tree-lined street and the sun peeped through the greenery to cast a shadow on some of the brownstones. The relentless sun caused the brownstones in the shadows to look fragile, and the dark buildings created a void on the street, a black hole waiting to swallow all who walked through the shadows.
Pigeons cooed and pecked on the corner of 84th and Second where someone had tossed a take-out bag at the trash can and missed. The pigeons fought the roaches for the spoils of someone who was a bad throw.

“Won’t you at least miss the neighborhood,” Margaret said. We sat at the bar and clinked our beer mugs to congratulate ourselves. Froth hung on Margaret’s top lip.

“Sure,” I said, taking a big swig. “It’s a nice area. It’s just a little overwhelming sometimes. The day to day drudgery is tough. You have to fight to stay afloat. And it’s so noisy over here. I can’t think.”

“That’s why I don’t understand how you can live here,” Margaret said. “It’s crazy.”

“I like the fight. It invigorates me.”

“Maybe Margaret and I should lease your apartment,” Carter said, trying to change the subject. “You know. It could be our weekend get away.”

“Have you lost your mind?” Margaret said.

“It is a nice neighborhood,” Carter said to me and leaned over to clink my mug.

* 

Jack Kragen grew up in this neighborhood. That was just one of the things I learned about him over a series of his several visits to my apartment to repair random things. He somehow managed to plop down and relate some story to me before he got around to any repair work. One of his first stories he told me from the room that bulged, which was attached to my kitchen and really nothing more than space that held my twin-
sized bed. He sat on the edge of my bed in his green robe with his legs crossed, chewing his cigar, and told me that he was a soldier in Korea.

“Back in 51’,” he’d said, “I was only nineteen years old. Can you believe that? Nineteen years old and had to go fight in that shit hole country and call that a life. We didn’t get any of the glamour those boys got from World War II. No one back home cared what we were doing over there in some weird country. Hell, most of ‘em at home didn’t even call it a war. Called it a political action or some bullshit like that. We lost over 50,000 men in that so-called political action. Doesn’t that sound like a war to you, Ms. Crawford?” I nodded my head fervently. “Just because some people don’t see it as a war don’t mean it ain’t,” he said. “I thought I’d go over there, fire a couple of rounds, and come home to one them big ticker-tape parades like those boys got in ’45. You know, be some kind of hero. Damn Truman wouldn’t let MacArthur drop the bomb on them. We had to stay over there for years. We were the ones that had to suffer, living in squalor. Mites and mud for a blanket. Freezing our asses off. That was home, Ms. Crawford.” He would click his teeth for emphasis after statements such as those. “We’re suffering and those people back home didn’t know what we were fightin’ for. They didn’t know the danger the U.S. was in. You got to know what’s happening on your own front door. Right?” I agreed with a nod. “But they didn’t care,” he said. “Neither did those bastard Sergeants. All they would tell us was ‘don’t be a wayside exhibit.’ That meant do what you have to do to survive. Always be aware.” I could tell he knew I was confused. “A wayside exhibit was a dead body, Ms. Crawford,” he said.

“What?” I thought that sounded rather harsh.
“There was so much killing, especially on the front line. The enemy couldn’t immediately collect their dead. They could only toss them aside until later. It was disgusting.”

“That is terrible,” I said.

“I decided I wasn’t going to let those foreigners get to me. No way. You have to be brave, Ms. Crawford.” He moved his cigar from the left side of his mouth to the right and stared straight ahead into my little kitchen. I really could do nothing but continue to nod.

“What about you?” he said, his eyes bulging, not blinking, continuing to stare.

“What do you mean?” I said, thinking that surely the conversation was almost over.

“You know. Are you the brave type? What would you do in a survival of the fittest situation?

“I guess I would try to avoid being a wayside exhibit.”

“See, that’s what gave so many soldiers shit for brains. You really don’t know what you’ll do until you’re face to face with the enemy. Know what I mean?”

I wasn’t sure if this was his way of engaging conversation or if he was always this morbid.

He explained that he only began to fully grasp the dismay of war after he had shot and killed for the first time. Even though I usually only halfway listened to him, this statement got my attention. I wasn’t sure whether to feel comforted by the fact that he had shared this with me, alarmed by the psychology of his killing behavior, or if I should
pity him because he had no one else to talk to but a tenant he had known for one month. He went on to discuss the mystery behind his left knee which never seemed to bend. Shrapnel. Apparently, it was lodged in his knee on the next to last day of his service. “What a bitch,” he said. “Thought I was gonna get out of that hell hole unscathed. Showed me.”

All I knew was that this old guy wouldn’t know an emotion if it were shot into his other knee, the good one, the pale skinny one. If he wanted to talk, I would listen. It was part of my character renovation that I was working on, in part to shut Margaret up and in part so that I could still recognize myself after work every day.

So, I listened. I listened as he told me about our neighborhood and how back in the 40s, Eighty-Sixth Street down to around Eighty-Second Street was predominantly occupied by German immigrants and had been since around the early 20s. This explained why there was a Hofbrauhouse in between Eighty-Third and Eighty-Fourth with servers who slammed down beer steins on the table; why there was a Scheifel’s Deli on the corner of Eighty-Fifth that specialized in German meats and in cheeses, especially Cambozola; and why there was a little grocery store in between Eighty-Second and Eighty-Third that sold German imported canned goods, candies, even gum that looked like Juicy Fruit but tasted like Big Red.

I thought all of it was just another little Upper East Side gimmick, a marketing coup, an advertiser’s dream. I could not have been more wrong. The area had thrived until around the mid-40s when the German sentiment was, of course, not too high. Tension exploded one day when a German grocer was shot in front of his store and left to
lie in his own pool of blood. Kragen said, “I’m sure that Nazi’s blood ran black.” I
didn’t know what to say, so I just stared at him as he rocked his crossed leg back and
forth. This was the night he fixed my clogged shower.

On the night he replaced some part on my garbage disposal, I got the story about
his childhood. His father was a factory worker and his mother a seamstress. They didn’t
have much money, but he still loved the city. Said it was his savior after the war. Said it
kept him mentally afloat after so much killing and deceit in Korea. Helped him pull
himself out of the mental battle. Invigorated him. After he finished his tour of duty, he
came straight back to New York and never left. He bought the apartment building in
1962 and at age sixty-four, he’d been there over thirty years and never planned to leave.
He said with Brenda’s help he should be able to survive in the place for many more years.

It was Brenda, though, who said I would never see my money if I didn’t move out
early. We plotted, planned, and scheduled for weeks. I wanted to get it right. It was my
first venture into what we began to call faux swindling. We couldn’t call it actual
swindling because I wasn’t cheating him out of anything. I was trying to keep him from
cheating me. I wasn’t sure if any of this counted toward my own pursuits in character
building.

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Since we couldn’t get the key to my new apartment until 11:00 the next morning,
we were going to sleep in my old apartment and get up early and give the keys to Brenda
and drive over to the West Side and my new apartment on Ninety-Third Street. Brenda
said Kragen usually returned around 9:00 in the morning. We planned to leave around
7:30, just in case. But Carter didn’t like the way Kragen’s friend Kip had stared at us. He thought Kip might tip-off Kragen. I didn’t like how Brenda was so adamant about 9:00.

For one last outing as a resident of the East Side, I wanted to get dressed up and go out to dinner: Ethiopian. We chose a restaurant on East Fifty-Fifth Street. We thought it sounded hip and cool. In keeping with the tradition of the place, we sat on little mahogany stools about two feet off the ground, ate our spicy vegetable entrees with our hands off one big tin pan, and drank many dark, sweet beers, still as pleased with ourselves as we were that morning when chili and chocolate filled our bellies. Carter was so pleased with himself that he started his talk again of moving to the city. “What’s the big deal?” he said. “This place isn’t so tough. I could survive here. Whatcha think, Margaret?” Margaret grabbed his beer, cutting him off at five.

“There’s not a restaurant like this place anywhere near Millsport,” he said.

The corner behind us was filled with big plush purple pillows. Long maroon curtains with gold tassels hung from the ceiling and brushed the floor. Carter plopped down in the middle of the pillows and knocked the tassels back and forth. His long legs stretched out into the floor, and he looked right at home as he ordered some type of fruit pie for dessert from the server. I grabbed Carter’s untouched beer, making it five for myself and ordered one of those fruit pies.

Margaret whispered to me, “I don’t know what’s gotten in to him. He’s been here two days and thinks he’s got the place mastered.”

“It is a mesmerizing place.”
“He just doesn’t get it. All he sees is the glitz and the glamour. He doesn’t think
about the logistics of living here. The cost. The grit. The grime. The drudgery, for the
love of God.”

“Margaret, don’t worry about it. He’ll be fine once you get back home.”

“Oh, no. You don’t know him. He’s like this. My God, every time he sees a
commercial on TV advertising weekend getaways to Las Vegas or Lake Tahoe, we have
to rush to see our travel agent. He’ll buy the latest package. Two weeks later he wants
something better.”

“Maybe he has a spending problem.”

“No, he’s got sucker written on his forehead. That’s his problem. He does the
same thing when he sees a commercial for the latest electronic toy. I have to flip the
channel when a commercial for IBM, Sony, or whatever else comes on because he has an
office full of stuff he doesn’t use. It drives me nuts.”

On the cab ride home Carter kept giving Margaret reasons why they should stay
an extra day in the city. The cab tossed around the meals in our stomachs as we sat in the
back seat, speeding up First Avenue, zigzagging around other cars, and Margaret would
only reply to me, “See what I mean? He drives me nuts. He’s the reason people in your
job never have a lack of business.”

When we arrived at my apartment, all rather tipsy, they were so engrossed in
their conversation about extending their stay that they only barely noticed when I said I
would follow them up in a few minutes. The stoop in front of my building looked very
inviting. My stomach did not fare well on the ride home, and my legs felt very weak. I
was so nauseated that I sat on the stoop and kept my head between knees, thinking that was supposed to work either when you feel faint and sick or for the tornado drills we used to have back in Millsport. I couldn’t remember which. Sweat trickled down the side of my face. I fanned myself with my hands. People stared as they walked by on the sidewalk. I had never felt as foreign to the city as I did right then.

Had I not felt so bad, I would have laughed. I needed to puke my guts out, and the street was as quiet as I had ever noticed. Where was the noise? The screeching of the garbage truck. The honking of the cabs. The screams and laughter of party-goers. I got nothing but a click clack of a branch hitting a window as a slight breeze blew. My little neighborhood block would have to hear as I purged myself of my need to live beyond my means. I stood to walk to the right of the stoop, remembering there were stairs that led down to the trash cans for the building, but my stomach was not pleased with the motion. All I could aim toward was the street light, trying to avoid any of Kragen’s property on the sidewalk, and I saw the spicy vegetable entrée hit the hood of a white Jeep Grand Cherokee that was parallel parked on the street.

Many doses of Dasani bottled water from my fridge cleared the Jeep of any evidence, washing away my association with the East Side. Carter raised the window from my second story apartment and yelled down, “You don’t have to get it shiny clean. Get back up here.”

“I’ll be back up in a minute.”

I leaned against the street light and faced the double green doors, a wave of exhaustion passing over me. More people walked by on the sidewalk, staring at me like I
was a homeless person about to ask them for money, their eyes meeting mine, staring through me and then immediately searching for the sidewalk again. It was as if they could actually see straight through me, through the emptiness, through my depleted insides. It was as if they could tell that I had nothing to offer, no fuel left. I felt defeated and wanted to shout, “Look, that’s my building. Right there. I live here. That’s my home.” But then I realized, in a sense, I was homeless; of all the places in this whole big city, I really belonged nowhere. The old building with its eye-like windows seemed to know this as much as I did, creaking and popping in conjunction with the faint breeze blowing, echoing throughout the block, announcing my moment of weakness, ushering me away, urging me not only out of the East Side but out of the city as well.

By the time I made it back to the dusty steps of the stoop again, I began to feel light-headed, like I might collapse on the steps of the building—my enemy that had fought against me all year—and surrender. The hot, thick air made me dizzy, and I began to feel like I was spinning out of control. The breeze continued to blow as if wanting to take advantage of my weakened state and whisk me away, toss me to the side. But I had already decided to fight against it, to be brave.

With the block spinning around and around, I stood facing the streetlight, my head as light as a balloon, and felt as if I were floating. I floated high above the stoop, above the people walking on the sidewalk, the white Jeep Cherokee, the green double-doors, the U-Haul packed with all my belongings, all the way down the block until I reached the steady flow of motion, pumping through the veins of the street, giving life, nourishing, replenishing.
CHAPTER V
Rottingham Divine

The thought of another summer passing and another winter waiting to attack the city with bitter cold winds and snow storms, made me begin to think that John was right. Maybe it was time for me to get out of the city. From the terrace at The Cloisters, as I sat on the surrounding stone wall, I could see the Hudson stretch down past the George Washington Bridge. Secluded from the rest of the city, The Cloisters sits atop a cliff on the northernmost part of the island and had always provided a quiet place for me to think. The gardens were still in full bloom, and the azaleas held their rosy color. Japanese Maples, lining the inner portion of the garden, caught the full strength of the wind blowing on the hill. It was late August, the time of year when I had met John and he first brought me to the Cloisters.

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That August, when I met John, had found me and my friends listening to a live recording session at Makor on the Upper West Side. A group of session players were recording a Gram Parsons tribute album and wanted background noise, the low hum of voices and clinking bottles from the bar. John was the rhythm guitar player. We met and joked that because our home states bordered—he was from Arkansas and I was from Tennessee—we should talk and get to know one another. This was all several weeks before he first took me to The Cloisters.
“I can’t think in the city,” he’d said on our first trip there. “It’s too crowded. But this place helps to calm me down.”

We sat in little wooden chairs in the Gothic Chapel and looked at medieval altarpieces from Italy and Spain. The hall’s architecture itself was stunning, the rose window enhancing the far wall, the vaulted ceiling and stone floors causing every word to echo.

“This is peaceful,” I said. “I feel like I’m at mass. Like we should whisper.” By that time, we had been dating for several weeks. Turns out bordering states could merge very well. Very well, indeed.

When John wasn’t in the studio, we spent most of our time exploring the city. I wasn’t too crazy, though, about the idea of going to The Cloisters because it was an hour’s trip away, at the top of the island. It was a branch of the Metropolitan Museum of Art dedicated to art of medieval Europe. He’d said if I loved art museums that I would love that place. I could tell by the time we walked into the first room that he was right. He was right about a lot of things, like the fact that we could still have a relationship even though he only spent six months out of the year in New York where he was a contract session player. The other half of the year he was in Arkansas doing session work and playing the bar scene in Austin. He was always in New York from July until December.

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I continued to watch the Hudson’s waters drifting downstream, and my thoughts drifted as well. John had given me a short deadline—only a week. My week was up. He’d wanted an answer that day. Would I move to Austin with him or not? He had been
offered a full-time job there as a session player for a TV show called Austin City Blues and couldn’t turn it down. I was very happy for him but sad for us. We had a good thing going: no pressure, no rules, just fun. This had been happening for two years. He would come into town for six months; we would have a great time together, and he would leave. It was a low-key, low-maintenance relationship that worked for both of us. We were thirty and were working very hard in our careers. He knew that was why I came to New York, and I knew that about him. We had our drive to succeed in common, and our arrangement, although not the most convenient situation, had made us happy. Now, I couldn’t get over the irony that it was John who asked me to leave the city.

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It was early February, two years before, when I had moved to the city. The sidewalks were caked with snow and ice my first week, making a trip to the grocery store on the corner potentially hazardous. People gauged their moods and their social life around the temperature outside. I wasn’t sure I had made the best decision to move to New York City during the winter. In fact, I wasn’t sure I had made the right decision to move there at all.

I had moved to New York for a job—a high-paying job doing graphic design for an advertising agency. I didn’t think I should pass up that opportunity because of a little snow or ice to move back the seventeen hundred miles I had just traveled. I decided that I should, at least, try my new way of life for six months.

By the time spring appeared and I began to thaw, the city took on a new landscape: tables and chairs lined the sidewalks in front of restaurants, bicycles and
joggers filled the streets in Central Park, cherry blossoms replaced barren branches, and
the scowls of my fellow New Yorkers turned into smiles. Summer brought trips to the
Jersey Shore, the Hamptons, and it also brought music concerts galore. Rock, pop, blues,
jazz, punk, funk, it was all there. This was what brought me to Makor and to John. He
was the one who had convinced me to stay, even though I had even received a good job
offer from a magazine in Atlanta and was seriously considering taking it just to get back
to the south and more familiar territory. John had convinced me that I would regret it if I
didn’t stay.

“You’ve come this far,” he’d said. “Why pack it up now? You’ll never know
what would’ve happened if you leave.”

By the time I had been living in New York for a year, the snow had returned to
deluge the city, and John was gone, his guitar wailing into the night in Arkansas studios
and Austin bars.

When he returned, the next August, many things had changed. I had received a
promotion at work, and I had become very attached the city, its harsh occupants and its
harsh weather. I started doing cover art design for the new CD that John and the other
guys were working on, and I began hanging around more at the different studios where
they practiced so that I could hear the songs and get ideas for design. We would refer to
songs by the studio were I first heard them so that I could keep them straight. Track one
became the Makor song. Track two was Thin Line. Track three: The Living Room. I
couldn’t resist going with a living room theme design for the cover.
In November, John was called to Austin for a special studio session over the weekend with some guys who had played with Willie Nelson, and he asked me to go with him. As he told me later, after he took the job in Austin, this was the session that would make or break him in the industry.

The studio where they recorded was in a small, one-story wooden house, and it didn’t have a name. It was on the corner of Rottingham and Divine Streets, so John and I started calling it Rottingham Divine. He loved the name, and so did all the other session players. They referred to it almost every time they started a new session. By the time the weekend was over, I had heard just about every variation of the name possible.

“Rottingham Divine session-take four,” someone in the band would say.

“Divine ham session: from the top,” someone else would say the next day.

Then it was “rotting ham is divine.” Followed by “roham-’vine.” They liked the album so much when they finished that they made a little shrine to the Rottingham Divine name—magic-marker drawings, displaying their interpretation of divine ham: ham with a halo, ham with angel wings, ham floating on a cloud surrounded by a heavenly choir. They were pleased when I praised their artistic design.

“Guess what we’re going to call the album,” John said. Our flight had just taken off from Austin, heading to New York, and he was listening to the rough cuts of their CD on his portable CD player.

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to work in Willie Nelson’s name somehow.”

“Nope,” he said. “Nowhere close. We’re going to call it Rottingham Divine. Isn’t that great?”
“I don’t know about that,” I said. “It’s a cute name for the studio. And your drawings were fun. But I’m not sure about it for an album name.”

“Why not?”

“Don’t you think it sounds confusing?” I said.

“What’s confusing?” He took out his earphones.

“It sounds contradictory to me. When I think of divine, I think of words like blissful, heavenly, or wonderful, not rotting. Don’t you think the rot in Rottingham conflicts with divine.”

“Perfect,” he said.

“What?” I said. I thought maybe the high altitude was making him momentarily delusional.

“That’s what we’re going for. A little bit of positive and a little bit of negative. Like a yin and yang effect.”

“I’m not sure that people will read Rottingham Divine and think of yin and yang,” I said.

“They don’t have to specifically think of that. We’re just going for a dichotomy effect. You know like good, bad; right, wrong; Or in the case of Rottingham Divine, we thought sweet, sour.”

“What do you mean?” I said.

“Hold on,” he said. “Give it a chance. What if you think of the sweetness of the divine and the sourness of rot?” He gave me one of the earphones and pushed track three. “Good things are the sweet and bad are the rot. Listen to this.”
Track number three was one of my favorites on the album. It was a song about a guy who celebrated his misery. His girlfriend had broken up with him, and he clung to his misery because it was all he had left of her. John had two guitar solos in the song. The tempo of the song was one of the fastest on the album.

“Now, listen to this,” he said. He pushed track four. It was a slower song about a person marveling at how a lake looks in the moonlight. “The whole album is like that,” he said. “One depressing song. One peaceful, happy song.” He turned off the CD player. “Whatcha think?”

“It’s a great idea,” I said. “I get it now that you explain it. But I’m not sure that everyone will pick up on what you’re trying to get across.”

“That’s fine,” he said. “You’re never going to reach everyone. It’s a concept that all of us on the album are fond of. It’s a huge part of our lives as musicians, having to take the sweet with the sour.”

“Give me the sweet over the sour any day,” I said.

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Back in New York, John still had another month and half to finish the other album with the guys there. The session in New York was for an alternative country singer whose first album had not received good reviews. John didn’t play on that record, but was happy to accept an offer for the second—that is until the Austin session happened. Everything changed for him after that session, which meant my life changed as well. All of the players decided to form a band. When he left New York in December, he started
spending more time in Austin. Then came the TV offer in July. That’s when all the talk of me moving to Austin started.

I could not have been more surprised. This was not the usual low-key, career-driven John. We had never discussed anything close to this type of commitment. I started thinking of New York and Austin as the sweet and the sour. Some days New York was the sweet and Austin the sour. Some days it was the other way around.

“What’s the problem?” he’d said. This was the first week after he found out about Austin.

“I’m just shocked. I wasn’t prepared to think about anything like this.”

“Well, Karen,” he said, “how in the world are we supposed to have a relationship if we don’t see each other?”

I knew he was upset when he called me Karen. He never called me Karen. It was always KC, short for my name, Karen Crawford. Some of my friends had called me that. John liked it because he said it reminded him of KC and the Sunshine Band, a favorite of his. I thought it was charming.

“I’m not saying no,” I said. “I just need time to think.” I could tell by the way he nodded that he didn’t like my response.

He did give me time. But all I did for the first couple of weeks was panic. Everywhere I went in the city, made me upset because I thought it might be my last time there. Then I thought of losing John if I didn’t move. That’s when the phone calls from him in Austin started.
“You were the one who wanted to leave that place,” he’d said. “Didn’t you plan on coming back to the south at some point?”

“Yes,” I said. “But I never had a timeline. I had planned on leaving when it felt right. I’m not sure it feels right.”

“Don’t you think it’s time?” he said. “You’ve been there long enough to get the experience you wanted.”

That’s when he said he needed to know my decision as soon as possible because a band member had offered him a portion of a time-share on a lake in Austin. He would take it if I didn’t move.

Staying in New York or moving to Austin both had too many positive and negative consequences. I didn’t know what to do, so I went to the only place were I knew I could clear my thoughts: The Cloisters.

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The terrace overlooking the Hudson began to get crowded, so I walked to the Cuxa Cloister, the biggest of The Cloisters on the upper level. One of the reasons I liked visiting The Cloisters was because of its unique design, which incorporated elements of actual medieval cloisters within the building itself. The Cuxa Cloister contained cloister components from a twelfth-century Benedictine monastery in the Pyrenees. It was one of my favorites because of its garden with concrete crossed pathways and a fountain in the center. To keep the garden as authentic as possible, medieval plants and vines were grown as well as modern ones.
I sat along the wall that was part of the actual cloister, surrounding the garden and thought of the monks that once called the monastery home. Even though they lived a peaceful existence, I wondered if they, at times, missed life outside the monastery, if they ever regretted their monastic lifestyle. I guess they, of all people, had to learn how to accept the good with the bad. Their sweet, serene existence came at a price of missing the joys of everyday living outside monastery walls. I wondered if any of those monks would approve of John’s Rottingham Divine theory. As a musician who had made many sacrifices for his art, John would approve of their many sacrifices for their God. The one thing they would probably all agree upon was that they had really sacrificed nothing—it was all a pleasure for art’s sake, for God’s sake.

I leaned against the column that supported the arched portion of the cloister and stretched out my legs on the wall, breathing in the fresh scents of the garden and thought about my own sacrifices, things that would seem like a sacrifice and things that wouldn’t. One scent that continued to fill the air was very familiar. It was a scent I had smelled all over the city—in Tompkins Square Park in the East Village, in Bryant Park near Times Square, especially in Central Park, the portion above the reservoir around Ninety-Third Street, which was close to my apartment. The smell was from the honeysuckle vine, a green vine that grows prolifically in the summer and blossoms in a small white flower cored with a yellow center. Those centers could be popped out and squeezed for their liquid.

Its smell, that smell of the city, the smell I loved, was not only pleasing and succulent but inviting and sweet.