

A HARP IN THE HEAD
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I've only just turned thirty, but I've already told this story a thousand times. It all starts and ends with water. At least, that's what Pops liked to say. We grow in it, our skin sponging up the life-giving nectar of our mothers, then, when we die, it oozes out of us like out of a punctured plastic bag. Punctured plastic bag? No, that's a bit gruesome. It flows from us like an ocean rushing to meet the shore, its ancient waters soaked by cosmic sand. Too poetic. I don't know if I'll ever get this story right, but, here I am, sitting in the shade of my camouflage bimini top, *tap-tapping* away on my computer as the Atlantic Ocean rocks me and this 54-inch Carver side to side.

Even though I'm facing away from Coney Island, I can still feel the tourists wearing away at Riegelmann Boardwalk as they stuff their mouths with salty hotdogs and jumbo fried shrimp from Paul's Daughter, mothers dragging children in a hurry toward the aquarium, Deno's Wonder Wheel embodying democracy as it spins people of all heights. I couldn't escape it all even if I wanted to. It's also where this story takes place. Thirteen years ago.

Why am I just writing it down now? Well, to preserve its integrity. You see, a close friend of mine told it to a semi-close friend of theirs who told it to a big-shot Hollywood exec who they sat next to in a plastic surgeon's waiting room. This Hollywood exec became so excited that he played a game of reverse telephone in order to track me down, even flying all the way from LA to meet with me in Crown Heights. This man, with skin the same hue of mahogany as mine, said that the world needs more stories like this one. That what I have is *valuable*. But that I need to hand it over to those capable of doing it justice. When he said, "You need to put it in the right

hands,” I heard, “the white hands.” And even if that’s not what he said, I told him the only way he was getting this story is if I wrote it myself. He scratched his surgically narrowed nose and said okay. I suppose I’m also doing it because I’m a bit too comfortable in life right now and I need to...rock the boat.

I promise I’m only half as corny as that pun.

“You’re late,” Pops said, angling his wristwatch toward his face as he leaned against the black door of his pickup.

“You and I both know that’s broken,” I said. “Plus, you know getting from the West Village to Sheepshead Bay is like going from New York to Ohio.”

I knew he was mad, but I still went in for a hug, and he wrapped his arms around my back, holding for a beat longer than usual. I’d only seen him a few days before, for dinner at the house, but the way he held me felt like the way someone hugs you when they haven’t seen you in a long, long time.

Then he got in the truck and nodded at me.

Without a word, I went to the trailer that held the *Cinqué Express*, our Lund A14 fishing boat, named in honor of Joseph Cinqué, who led the revolt on *La Amistad*. The boat was one or two steps up from a dinghy, and if we got caught in the wake of even a tugboat, we’d be holding on for dear life, but it did the job.

We lived in one of those rare Crown Heights brownstones with a driveway, but I still remember Pops parking the *Cinqué Express*, its hull painted fire hydrant red and the words “Cinqué Express” emblazoned in Big Bird yellow, right on Nostrand Avenue for everyone to gawk at. Even as I write this, my jaw clenches from the way the kids at school used to call me “Boat Bitch,” right before running down an ever-changing list of names for Pops: Skippa the Nigga, Hood Gilligan, Black Sparrow, and, an all-time favorite, Moldy Dick. That is, until Pops and I took Keenan Richards on the *Cinqué Express* one Saturday, and come Monday, everyone was asking for a ride.

“Make sure that drain plug is in,” Pops said from the front of the truck.

“I *know*, Pops.”

“Yeah, you didn’t know that one time.”

“That was ten years ago, Pops. I was seven.”

“You still didn’t know.”

At this point, it was muscle memory. I inserted the drain plug into the stern, undid the safety straps tied to the trailer, and slapped the hull twice. It was like ballet, or the Knicks running a play that actually worked. I stepped away, and Pops, without checking to see that I was out of his way, reversed the trailer toward the water, until exactly two-thirds of it was in.

I unhooked the safety chain from the bow, then from the wench, and stepped onto the trailer, my beat-up Reeboks planted firmly as I guided the boat away from me, into the water, until it began to float. I gripped the frayed rope attached to the bow, and Pops drove off to park the truck, eventually reappearing on the same path; two telescopic pole nets and a debris grabber in one hand, and an old school blue Playmate cooler in the other.

It was a spring day just like today, and I can still see him, as if he's right in front of me, walking with his tools and our food; his short, but sturdy body in a faded green plaid flannel, grease-stained khaki pants, a black waterproof jacket that was beginning to hug his stomach, and light-brown leather non-slip boat shoes I'd bought him the previous Christmas. Everything looked like it had just been pulled out of the mud, but he carried himself as if he were a king dressed in royal garb; a salt-stained cap that was once navy but had faded with time to bluish-gray was his crown.

"Get in, son," he said once he reached me.

"It's okay, Pops. I got it. Go ahead."

He placed the cooler down, held his hand out for the rope, and I gave it up. I stepped onto the boat, grabbed the cooler from the dock, took the poles and grabber from him, and kept it steady as he stepped in. When all was balanced and in its rightful place, we pushed away from the dock, he started the motor, and we were off. Despite how smooth this all was, we were always prepared for mistakes, but that day, not one step was out of place.

I didn't know where we were going, and, with the roar of the *Cinqué Express's* motor, it made no use to try and ask. But if I had, I know that Pops would have just said, "We'll see," as he continued to stare into the distance. For him, life on the water was all about feeling—he believed that the ocean had a spirit, and that the waves, like some nautical ouija board, would guide the tiller, rendering his hand as little more than an extension of their will.

It was the same for where we launched. Just a text with a location, mobster-style. *Kings. Venice. One 15. Sheepshead.* Sometimes even outside of Brooklyn; in Manhattan, or, like that one time, the Bronx. Yacht Clubs, too. When I was younger, he'd take pride in showing up to

these marinas where we'd be the only Black people not working on the staff or in the restaurants that boaters frequented before and after their excursions. The white folks would glare at us with pearl-like eyes of anger, confusion, and, in many cases, amusement. Pops always held his head high, instructing me to take our boat off the trailer, but "slowly, son. Take your time," so they could watch us.

Not all the cloud-colored people at these marinas were racist, though. Some would approach, and Pops, after discerning that they had no ulterior or condescending motives, would remove his cap, run his hand over his shiny bald head, its deep-brown reflecting the sun's rays like a polished grocery store floor, and smile as he and the other man, or men—always men—discussed the water, their boats, and the advantages and disadvantages of joining a particular marina's club. But that was only when I was younger. By the time I was seventeen, Pops had stopped trying to use us, and the *Cinqué Express*, as a stand against racism, and just became, as he liked to say, his face tilted toward the blue sky, "One with the water." This meant a smaller rotation of marinas. An even smaller number of people he wanted to speak with. And more erratic behavior on land.

It wasn't long before we'd rounded the razor-shaped edge of Manhattan Beach, waving to the handful of people and their dogs running wild. The welcoming spring weather drew lovers together on multicolored towels; children in hoodies who chased and threw bread at the seagulls; enthusiastic joggers who hustled back and forth in the hopes that wind resistance, wet sand, and salty air would increase their stamina. Squawks, laughter, and crying punctuated the air.

Punctuate, is that right? I don't have Wi-Fi out here and can't consult Dictionary.com, but it feels right. I admit I'm a first-time writer, but I do read a lot. About a book a week, and all

types. Fiction, nonfiction, poetry, even screenplays. I know I shouldn't be editing while writing, that the purpose of a first draft is to just get it out and worry about the rest later—an introductory writing course I took in college taught me that—but I can't help but wonder what type of writer I am. Straight and to the point, like that racist Hemingway? Descriptive to the degree where a setting takes on a life of its own, like Toni Morrison? Experimental and absurd, like Charles Wright? You know what—I'll worry about that later.

I know I said that the area that I'm in right now, Coney Island, is where this story takes place, but I wasn't being accurate—it's Coney Island Creek. Please don't think of me as an unreliable narrator. It's just that most folks don't know where that is.

Easter was the previous weekend, and the amusement park on Coney Island had just reopened. This meant a swell of tourists rushing to grab a piece of history in the form of a pretzel or a Cyclone game at Maimonides. A memory they could take back to their respective homes, hold it up for their friends to inspect with awe, jealousy, or, worse, indifference, until it lost its luster and was replaced by a trip to somewhere new. I doubt anyone ever said, "We'll always have Coney Island," but I could be wrong.

Passing the beachside mansions, some maintaining their rustic red-brick exteriors, others having been painted gray-white, we took in the view of the black-and-white lighthouse, and the Freedom Tower, which loomed in the distance, forever reminding us that no one, especially a nation that believes itself to be the greatest on the globe, is untouchable.

Coney Island resembles a whale—a sperm whale, in fact. You'd have to look at it on a map, or, if you're rich, a helicopter, but just trust me, it does. And when you round the curve of

its head, and continue east, traveling over its crown and down its spine, you will be in Coney Island Creek. Our esteemed setting.

Pops cut the motor. I straddled my seat and watched as he reached into the cooler in front of him, retrieved his thermos, poured himself a cup of oil-black coffee, and inhaled the rising steam until his lungs couldn't expand anymore. Then, finally, with closed eyes, he took a sip, and smiled.

The smile vanished as he snapped his head down and leveled his eyes at me. "Why were you late?"

"Because of the subway."

He continued staring.

"Because I woke up late."

"I don't pay for you to party. In fact, you know it makes no sense for you to be dorming in the West Village when we have a perfectly good and free home in the heart of Brooklyn. Even your little hipster friends ask why you don't live there. I hear them when you visit with them, you know."

What a funny way of saying, "I miss you."

I broke his gaze and reached into the cooler, finding my own thermos full of black tea. I unscrewed the cap, poured the amber-colored liquid into it, inhaled the vapors as deeply as I could, and then downed it in one throat-burning gulp.

"It's that new brand you said you like," he said, his head turned away from me. "Had to go all over Brooklyn to find it."

“Thanks, Pops. And I’m sorry for being late. But”—I took a breath—“you know I need to do my own thing. I come home when I can, and we still do this every Saturday, so...”

He coughed and straightened his back. “We haven’t been here in a while. Long enough for you to need a refresher. Unless you’re learning about the New York City waterways at NYU?”

“I am not,” I said, my relief coming out in the form of laughter.

“All this”—he waved his hand around—“it used to be called ‘Gravesend Creek,’ on account of people dying here a century or so ago. There was a lot of traffic, and accidents would happen. The man who designed that park over there”—he nodded to a tree-filled area not far from us—

“Was Calvert Vaux, Pops. I know, I know. He drowned in these waters.”

“Okay, smart guy. What about that?” he asked, pointing at a half-submerged submarine with yellow paint at the top.

“*That*,” I said. “Was built by a man in the 60s. He wanted to find the *Andrea Doria*. But when the fool tried to launch it in the 70s, it was too heavy for the crane they’d hired to move it from land to water. They removed some of the ballast, then, when it was the right weight, the owner told the crane operator not to drop it *all* the way into the water, since they needed to replace some of the ballast they’d just removed, for balance, right, but they messed up, and the submarine flipped over and got stuck here, in the creek. The media and public were watching from the shore, and the guy ended up being ridiculed.”

A smirk appeared on his face then, and he patted my shoulder with a heavy hand.

“There’s my boy. So what’s the lesson there?”

“That this place is cursed and we should leave immediately?”

Pops removed his hand and shook his head. “Man, you sure fooled me. You may remember a bit of the history I taught you, but you’re losing your ability to think at that expensive excuse for a school.”

I can’t lie, that stung. Not being able to measure up in the eyes of the man who made me hurt, but we didn’t have the type of relationship where I could actually come out and say that, so I just gritted my teeth and continued to listen, hoping that the feeling would drift away as easily as it had come.

“The lesson,” Pops continued. “Is that when you take for material gain, you and your dreams eventually get taken as well. You know what I always say.”

“Everything has its rightful place.”

“That’s right, and when it comes to these waters, most of what’s in it belongs to it. But not everything, which is why we do what we do. There’s history in these waters, and the world, especially now, needs that history to guide it. Still, this creek right here is full of ghosts. People, but also ships. Rum runners used to outrace the Coast Guard and sometimes ditch their vessels. Others crashed. Even today people come to abandon their ships. The good thing is that they create new reefs for the wildlife, the bad thing is that if you disturb these wrecks, like the man with the yellow submarine wanted to do, you can cause lethal chemicals to shake free, poisoning the water and the air. This creek is so polluted that people come here to clean their boats, because of how corrosive it is, but even with the pollution and the ghosts and the death, it’s still beautiful. Anyway, that’s the lesson for today. Let’s get to work.”

I handed him a telescopic net, grabbed one for myself, and, like two synchronized swimmers, we loosened the black plastic latches at our tools' necks, extended the poles as far as they could go, and, after locking the latches in place, gripped the poles like ancient scrolls bearing the answers to life's mysteries.

He shifted on his seat so that he faced north, and began surveying the murky water. I followed suit, both of us careful to not put too much weight on the port side—a delicate balancing act that we had to maintain to avoid capsizing.

It's funny, looking back on it, I'm sure people saw us out there—two men on a boat, in a creek, with poles in their hands and hope in their hearts—and assumed we were fishing. And I guess we were, in a way. What we did—mudlarking, foraging, and a ton of other unsavory names—required the patience of both a fisherman and the type of person who enjoyed poring over 3,000-piece jigsaw puzzles. The objects of our attention didn't have beating hearts, rippling gills, or mouths that could find themselves pierced with painful hooks. But Pops would argue that the artifacts we sought were very much alive.

Over the years, we'd found guns of various calibers and makes, waterlogged dining tables with chipped china not far away, tire-less bicycles and bicycle-less tires, dildos longer than our forearms, sunken jet skis with intact cell phones and wallets still in their airtight trunks, and other unimaginable oddities that took on a new form when discovered beneath waters that surround a city that flows in all directions, nonstop.

Our fellow mudlarkers, the guys who Pops felt the most comfortable around and might even consider friends, could claim silicone breasts (Rodney found those floating off of Coney Island), a grand piano with all of the keys intact (Sal came upon it in the Lower New York Bay),

and human skulls (Tiny John is the skull man, but the first he found was in the Bronx River). For the less fortunate, like Lance, they'd contracted gonorrhea by dipping their bare hands into the Gowanus Canal, and, without thinking, putting their fingers into their mouths right after.

The thing is, you didn't choose the life of a mudlarker, the life of a mudlarker chose you, and everyone had their private reasons for why they continued to do it, until they didn't do it anymore. For Pops, it was a spiritual practice—the embodiment of a higher calling. Later on, I'd realize it was also an escape, a way of coping. For me, it was a chance to communicate with him in the same way, the only way, really, that we ever had. The water was our medium, our mediator, and also the witness to the problems that plagued us on land.

"I heard a harp go off in my head when I saw all those artifacts," Pops said. He continued to scan the water nearest to him.

"What?"

"Don't tell me you've already forgotten the wise words of Gene Ritter, God bless his soul."

"Oh. Yeah."

"He's been dead, what, almost five months now? The best mudlarker there was. But, as he'd tell it, he was a 'cultural research diver.'" Pops smiled then, remembering a man he'd only known as a myth, but had seen in passing a couple times.

"You know what he meant, right? By the harp in his head?"

"Sure, Pops."

He pulled the pole onto his lap and turned to me. "Don't '*Sure, Pops*' me. Do you know what he meant or not?"

I inhaled a lungful of salty air, held it for a moment, then let it out. “Pops, you’ve been preaching the Gospel of Gene for years now. It’s hard to keep track of it, not to mention make sense of what the crazy—”

Pops’s frown became more pronounced, so I stopped. He closed his eyes, and said, “It’s a feeling, son. And I know you know what it is. When you spot that piece in the deep. You’re not sure if what you’re seeing is something, or nothing, but then you investigate further, and you come up with a sacred artifact, and you hear that noise, that *ping*, go off in your head, which tells you that you’re living into your purpose. That you’re doing what you’re supposed to be doing.”

To tell the truth, I’d never felt that. I’m pretty sure Pops knew it, too, and that it was a serious source of disappointment for him. All I could do was nod along in pretend understanding, hoping that he’d turn away and go back to searching the polluted waters for junk, but he kept his eyes on me, as if he were hunting for something else.

“I don’t like what that school, and those people, are doing to you, son. They’re corrupting your essence.”

I popped the latches of my pole and contracted it with a snap before tossing it back into the space between us, where the cooler was.

“What—”

“I’m tired of this, Pops. Tired of you acting like me going to college is some form of blasphemy. Like we need to live like hermits, only leaving the house to crawl across the water in search of garbage that nobody else wants. I’m getting a degree so that I can be more than—”

“What, me? Be more than me? It’s okay, son. You can say it. I know you don’t think much of me. Even though I’ve given you a comfortable life. Even though I’ve tried to teach you

how to live, to pass on things to you that I've learned from this water, but this"—he opened up his arms to the calm water around us—"isn't for you anymore, I suppose. By tomorrow you're going to be wearing a suit and working in some Manhattan high-rise where they tax your soul in order to increase the bottom line. Your mother would have—"

"She wasn't my mother, Pops. I didn't even know her."

His hands began to shake, and I thought the pole might slip out of them, but, worse, the boat was becoming unbalanced, so I slid to the starboard side. There was now another foot of distance between us, but it felt much larger than that.

"Don't ever say that again. I don't care what you think, or how you feel, but she was, and is, your mother."

"A mother wouldn't push out a baby and kill herself a month later. She left us, both of us, and not a day goes by when I think about her."

His face twisted in pain, and he dropped the pole as he brought his hand to his chest, squeezing it. "Ow," he said, struggling to breathe.

I reached for him, but he swatted my hand away. "What is it, Pops?"

"Nothing. Just a little ache. It's fine."

His pole, floating in the water, was still in reach. I retrieved it and handed it to him. He went back to staring at the water, and I moved to the triangular seat at the bow. "What's on land always comes to light in the water," Pops always said. Not a verse from the Gospel of Gene, but one of his own maritime maxims. I thought of it then, my mind floating out to the undulating water in front of me, a Home Depot to my left, and a smattering of other random industrial

buildings to my right. Black-and-white loons soared high above us as green-and-white-headed buffleheads flew lower and long-tailed ducks floated in the distance.

Seemingly disconnected, but relevant scenes flashed in my mind's eye: the time Pops and I found a horse skeleton in the East River, the framed photo of Mom holding me in the hospital bed, her full lips parting to reveal teeth, but a deadness behind her light-brown eyes; the girl in my Intro to Writing I class, Melissa, whom I still hadn't worked up the nerve to speak to.

And then I saw it.

It wasn't more than what appeared to be the sun reflecting off a shiny rock, but I figured that I'd be stuck on that boat for a couple hours more, so I might as well check it out. Pops was still glued to his side of the boat, and I silently moved to my original seat, reached into the space where the cooler and our extra tools were, and removed the debris grabber, then returned to the bow. I'm sure Pops's curiosity was piqued, but he made no show of it.

I thought I'd lost it.

That's the nature of water and what lives inside it—forever moving, no matter how much anyone, or anything, wants to control it. But I still leaned over the edge, one hand on the *Cinqué Express's* red hull, the other wielding my debris grabber like some hoodoo conjure cane. The thing about this work is that, in addition to patience and a careful eye, you need to develop a strong sense of acceptance, because the days where you find nothing more than bottle caps, broken eyeglasses, and bent-up birdcages far outnumber those when something slightly more special, but still mundane, is recovered. With this carved into the core of my being, I was beginning to give up, until I saw what I thought was that same distorted glint coming from a set of rocks ten or twelve feet below.

The grabber was still compressed, and I didn't want to alert Pops, since excitement on his end always translated into anxiety on mine. Trying to be as quiet as possible, I slowly extended it to eleven feet—a length unusual for a tool like this, but it was a gift for Pops I'd custom-ordered from a company in Sparks, Nevada that specialized in pick-up tools. They called this one “The Grappler.”

I could feel beads of sweat breaking through the skin of my forehead. The tool was so long that it was difficult to keep steady. Like a game of operation where one false move results in an eardrum-piercing *ANGGGGGG!*, I knew I had only one shot. I steadied the grabber, directing it into the water with surgical precision. When I thought I was within striking distance of the glimmering object, I squeezed the lime-green trigger, causing whatever was between those rocks to disappear. Knowing it had fallen further into the water, unlikely to ever turn up again unless some “cultural research diver,” like Pop's beloved Gene Ritter, scoured the depths of the creek, I mouthed a four-letter word that I never liked to use.

Accepting defeat, I raised the grabber out of the water. It was so long that I couldn't just pull it out—I needed to lift it out with one hand and gently retract it with the other. But when I raised it, I saw something hanging on the end of it, a circular object spinning as sunlight bounced off it! I quickly retracted the grabber and reached for the object, not even taking the time to see what it was, and pocketed it.

I did feel something strange, though.

The moment my hand had touched it, there was a warm vibration that spread from the top of my head to the tips of my toes. Only later did I realize that this was what Pops and Gene had always spoken about with religious fervor—the harp in the head.

“Get something?”

I turned around and saw Pops looking at me with soft, curious eyes. Whatever pain he’d felt was still there, but this, a potential find, was strong enough to override it.

“No.” I shook my head and put the grabber back in its place. Maybe it was because I was also still hurt, or just wanted to rebel, but I decided to keep this one to myself. A symbol of my independence from him and the failure I believed he felt when he looked at me. I also wasn’t in the mood for another *flotsam* vs. *jetsam* debate.

“No luck over here, either. I guess it’s time to eat and get out of here.”

He handed me a pepper turkey, jalapeno, and spicy mustard sandwich, my favorite, and we ate in silence. That same silence carried us all the way back to the dock at Sheepshead Bay, and only broke when Pops was back in the truck, the *Cinqué Express* securely fastened to the trailer.

“Want a ride?”

“No, thanks, Pops. I need to get back to the city.”

“Can’t swing by the house for even a second?”

“I want to, but I can’t. Homework and all of that, you know.”

He nodded and drove off. The next day, in the comfort of my too-small dorm room that faced Washington Square Park, I got a call from Rodney, a friend of Pops, and, as you may remember, the mudlarker who’d happened upon a pair of silicone breasts. He told me that he went to the house, as he always did on Sundays, to share a cup of coffee and discuss the news. Pops didn’t answer the door, but the pickup was in the driveway, so he assumed Pops was at the store or something and took a seat in the same rocking chair he always did. But after an hour, no

sign of Pops. He knocked and knocked and knocked. Sensing that something was off, he forced the door open. On the carpeted staircase in front of him was Pops, his open eyes staring at the ceiling, a mug split in two on the floor, the dried stain of black tea outlined on the hardwood.

Heart attack and he was gone. Just like that.

I was just seventeen. And even though I was smart enough to enroll in college at that age, I didn't know crap about crap. What it means to lose someone. The fragility of life. That most of us don't get to choose our last words. More concretely, I had no idea what to do when someone died, and I had no desire to learn. Fortunately, Rodney—who would soon become my guardian—was there to make arrangements, and the mudlarkers pooled their money together for the wake, funeral, and then a seaworthy sendoff.

Sheesh, is this getting too sentimental? I need to relax. I'm not in the "industry," per se, but I know that Hollywood loves exploiting trauma, especially when it's Black. One minute I'm out here writing my life story on this boat, the next Michael B. Jordan, who in no way shape or form resembles me, is winning an Oscar for a "gut-wrenching" performance. What's worse is they'd cast him as seventeen-year-old *and* thirty-year-old me.

I'd told Rodney I had more than enough money for everything—Pops had flipped mom's life insurance policy, and he also had a solid one of his own, making it possible for me to not have to work for a long, long time—but he wasn't hearing it. Seeing all of those people at the wake, lining up to pay their respects, was surprising. I didn't know how much Pops had meant to so many people.

I shook hands, received hugs without reciprocating, ate the food older women handed to me, and listened as everyone painted the picture of a man that I realized I didn't know as much

as I could have. A parent whom I only viewed as such, rather than a person. But I believe it was the same from where he stood—that I was a son, trying to grow into a man, but still just a son. Maybe that’s where all the distance and disappointment came from.

The day after the funeral, the mudlarkers launched from Sheepshead, in honor of Pops’s last expedition, and formed a four-boat square. I stood on *Sheba*, an aluminum fishing boat that Rodney had built with his own hands. They’d each asked for one of Pops’s finds, anything, and I gave Tiny John a horseshoe Pops had found the previous year, in the Bronx River; Sal a smoking pipe that Pops recently discovered in Dead Horse Bay; a whistle from South Beach for Lance, and one of Pops’s most treasured finds for Rodney: a pan flute, also from Dead Horse Bay, that he loved to polish. He was able to get some sound out of it, too.

They said a few words and tossed the objects back into the ocean. When it was my turn to say something, I decided not to, because I still didn’t really have any words for what I was feeling. Rodney brought me back to the brownstone, and I lay in bed for an entire week and replayed our last day together—and all of the days before—like a disjointed movie in the one-seat theater of my mind.

When I’d finally turned my phone back on, I saw dozens of emails from teaching assistants, my RA, and texts from a handful of my friends asking what the heck was going on. But I didn’t respond. Instead, I just took a shower, pulled my clothes on, and took the subway back to West 4th Street; head turned down to avoid any of my friends or classmates that might be rushing to and from class around the Square.

I swiped my card through the turnstile, and took the stairs to the second floor, where my dorm was. *Thank God*, I thought, when I turned the lock and found Paul, Craig, and Jimmy, my

roommates, gone. My room, which I shared with Jimmy, was just as I'd left it two weeks ago. Our extra-long twin beds nearly touching each other, our chairs in front of the window back-to-back with organized chaos strewn across our sand-colored desks.

All I needed was a black garbage bag. I shoved all of my clothes into it, as well as a framed photo of me and Pops—one we took when I was five, yellow and red paint from the *Cinqué Express* covering my little face like makeup on a clown, his thick arm around me as he made a wide smile of pride. Everything else, except my laptop, could stay.

People disappeared all the time. Sometimes you'd hear that Brian took too many shrooms and had to go home. Kelly got addicted to cocaine and older men buying her drinks at 1OAK. Luke couldn't balance an overbearing workload at Stern and the two jobs he took to pay back tsunami-sized debt. Other times, you'd hear nothing at all, and that was that. The only people I'd tell were my RA, so she wouldn't file a missing persons report, and the bursar, so they'd notify all of my professors that I'd dropped out. Easy.

With the garbage bag on my back, I left my dorm and walked out of the building. The sounds of Washington Square Park, like a siren song, beckoned me. It was spring, after all, so the men pushing weak hydro were out, as were the back-flipping performers, the drummers, the young women with tiny dogs, the everyday addicts, the artists, and everyone else who called this city home, even if only for a while. Wanting to lose myself in the deluge, I walked slowly toward the fountain, closed my eyes, and allowed its mist to kiss my face.

"Hey," someone behind me said. They even went as far as tapping my shoulder.

I turned around, and in front of me was Melissa, from Intro to Writing I.

"Hey," I replied, surprised.

“You haven’t been in class the last two weeks. Everything okay?”

I’d never been this close to her, and I made a mental note of all I could see, so I wouldn’t forget. The way her perfectly-maintained locs formed a crown on her head as others fell to her shoulders. Well-moisturized skin that the sun loved to touch. A pair of dark-brown, almost black, eyes that made me feel like I was sinking to the ocean floor, but somehow could still breathe.

“Everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah. I mean, no. But it’s fine.” I don’t know why I didn’t just put up a front and keep it moving, but there was something about those eyes. I felt like they could see through anything.

She nodded at the black garbage bag slung over my back. “Going somewhere?”

“Home. Back to Brooklyn.”

“Well, before you do, can I buy you a cup of coffee? It looks like you need it.”

“Uh”—I looked up at the arch, failing to find a legitimate excuse—“I gotta go. But thanks.”

“Come on.” She placed a hand on my shoulder, and I almost dropped the bag. “Just sit with me for a little.”

“Okay.”

We walked east, toward University Place, then made a left, and found a coffee shop that had a different name months ago, and would no doubt be replaced by another before the year was up.

“What would you like,” she asked, staring at the menu above us.

“Just a black tea, please.”

“Nothing to eat?”

“No, thanks.”

“Suit yourself,” she said. But when we got to the counter, she ordered my tea, a matcha latte, and two large oatmeal cookies. We found a table, and she slid one of the cookies and a napkin toward me, only saying, “Eat.”

“I feel like I should have paid,” I said in between bites. The sweet raisins, the strong cinnamon flavor, and the feeling of rough grains rolling over my tongue made me realize I hadn’t been conscious of what I was eating since that sandwich Pops had handed me on the boat. It was like I had no memory of anything that had happened after that point.

“Why, is this a date?” She stared at me with a straight face. My heart turned to a steel anchor, plunging to bottomless depths, and was only yanked back when she smirked.

“So,” she continued. “Where have you been?”

“I had to take care of some stuff.”

She leaned forward, like we were conspiring to rob a bank. “Take care of some stuff, huh? So mysterious. What are you, a spy?”

I laughed. The curving of my lips, opening of my mouth, and staccatoed *he-he-he* was another reminder that I hadn’t done this since Coney Island Creek with Pops. Sitting across from her, I wasn’t conscious of it then, but she was, in a way, bringing me back to life. She later told me she was on a “rescue mission,” and wouldn’t let up until she finished the job, no matter how long it took.

“No, I’m not a spy. It’s just that—” I took a breath. “My dad died. Unexpectedly. So I’ve been dealing with that.”

She covered my hand with her own, warmth radiating into it. “I’m so sorry. I—I didn’t know. Otherwise I wouldn’t have pried and made all these jokes and—”

“It’s okay. You’re fine. Honestly, this is nice...being able to get my mind off of it for a bit.”

Despite what I’d just said, I ended up telling her about that last day with Pops. Coney Island Creek. The argument. The only thing I’d left out was what I found. But when she asked, “So, did you find anything that day?” I told her the truth.

“Yeah, I did.”

“And?”

“It was a pocket watch. An old one.”

“Do you have a photo?”

I didn’t. But I did have the real thing. I’d had it on me ever since that day. In a pocket, in my hand, or even under my pillow. After I’d cleaned it off, I noticed that it looked like it was made of solid gold. Inside was a semi-clouded face with black roman numerals to mark the hours, but, other than that, it was fully intact. And on its inner cover were two engravings: “Christopher Plank,” and, below that, an emblem made of some coat of arms, surrounded by an oval border; the words “Gold medal” at the top, and “Baltimore 1897” on the bottom.

I dug into my coat pocket, wrapped my hand around it, and reached across the table, only opening my hand once it was in front of her.

The gold reflected in her eyes as she looked down at it, then back up at me. Her mouth was half open, and after gathering enough saliva to wet her throat, she asked, “Can I touch it?”

“Sure.”

I could tell she was in awe. What was strange was that I felt a vibration race down and up the length of my body—the same feeling I had when I first found the pocket watch at the creek.

“*Wow*,” she eventually said, looking back up at me. “What are you going to do with it?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe sell it.”

“This seems too special to sell. But, if you want, I know a pawn shop not too far from here. Want to go?”

I didn’t think she’d be so eager. The truth was, I didn’t want to sell it. I planned to keep it with me forever. But I still wanted to keep talking, so I said, “Not now, maybe another time. Want to walk around?”

“Lead the way.”

We walked back down University Place and cut a left on West 3rd. I was nervous that we’d run out of things to talk about, but the conversation flowed the whole way. She told me about how she grew up on Long Island, one of five girls. Her dad was from Jamaica, and her mom was from Lansing, Michigan. They’d met in the seventies, at a rent party in Harlem. One of the things I loved most about her was that she told stories in a way that drew you into them, as if you were right there, not just watching it unfold in front of your eyes, but playing the role of an active participant. The taste of Appleton Estate on your tongue, Beres Hammond and bass blasting into your ears, someone’s cousin or other getting too frisky with so-and-so’s mother. Listening to someone never felt so good, so right.

As we crossed Bowery—with brunch spots full of drunk white kids sucking down diluted mimosas and inhaling tasteless egg frittatas—I wondered when the trauma would come out; the moment when her stories would take a turn for the worse and she’d say that her parents got

divorced, one of her sisters met some fateful end, or that an estranged uncle had crept into her bedroom. I'm not a cynic, but I was in a dark place, and I guess I expected everyone to be carrying dark things, even though, when I looked at her, I saw only light, like when you're swimming back up to the water's surface, and, once you break it, it looks like the sun's casting diamonds in every direction. But the darkness never came. Her life wasn't perfect, no one's is, but it was mostly a happy one.

The street became more residential the farther we moved east. Brick fire escapes, piles of black trash bags, and the gentle harmony of a stringed instrument I couldn't quite place sailing down from a nearby window, surrounding us like some dreamy romance, but one where the core conflict had everything to do with love and nothing to do with the Black characters' race. More *Love Jones* than *If Beale Street Could Talk*. But, for the record, I love both of those films.

"When are you going to tell me to shut up?" she asked on Second Ave.

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I talk too much. Everyone says that."

"I could listen to you all day."

She smiled, then took my hand.

Close to East Houston, a wiry old woman pushing a shopping cart bumped into me. I kept it moving, but Melissa told me to check my jacket.

Oh no.

My chest became tight at the possibility that I'd already lost it, but when I wrapped my hand around the pocket watch and confirmed that it was still there, right next to my beating heart, I breathed easier.

“You okay?” Melissa asked.

“Yeah, sorry. I just—I thought I lost it.”

“I get it. But it’s not like it was really yours to begin with, right?”

“What do you mean?” I started to feel threatened and wanted to run. This whole day, grabbing coffee with her, holding hands—it was like the clouds I’d forecasted were finally coming out.

“Christopher Plank. The name on the inside?”

“Oh, yeah.” I said, thinking of the engraving. “Everything has its rightful place.” It took me a second to realize that it was Pops speaking through me, that his maritime maxims had melded to the marrow of my being.

Maritime maxims had melded to the marrow of my being. Is there such a thing as too much alliteration? This business of writing makes me so self-conscious. It’s like I’m a construction worker, or a surgeon, and I have a ton of different tools at my disposal—alliteration, metaphor, simile (I’m only half-clear on the difference), ellipses, commas, semicolons, white space, single-sentence paragraphs, page-length paragraphs, and on and on and on—and I have no idea if I’m using a screwdriver to flatten a nail or a scalpel to close an incision. Oh, and now the mixed metaphor...

I lowered my head and gazed at the sidewalk covered in black bubble gum that was probably once pink. “Anyway”—I looked back up and gave her a weary smile—“I have to go. But thanks for everything today. I needed it.”

“Of course.” She asked for my number and address, so “I won’t have to depend on a chance encounter next time I want to see you,” and walked back toward the West Village while I went to catch the F.

The same sinking feeling I had back at the fountain appeared in my heart. Except now that she was gone, the ability to breathe through it also vanished. And worse, the sinking only grew stronger on the ride back to Brooklyn. And stronger when I got off the train at Nostrand. And stronger with each step I took to the house, which made each one that more difficult. The concrete set of stairs leading to the front door might as well have been the Great Wall of China. Once I made it inside, my heart was on the seafloor, with no farther depths to travel, and I passed out on the living room couch—all of my clothes still on. Even my shoes.

The knocking woke me up. Sunlight filtered through the white sheer curtains, telling me it was morning. And the knocking, which became only louder with each passing second, told me that someone, probably Ms. Clara, Rodney, or some other elder checking up on me, was there.

“One second,” I called. I wiped the sleep from my eyes, the drool from my cheek, and straightened my jeans. But when I opened the door, it wasn’t Ms. Clara, Rodney, or anyone else I suspected—it was Melissa.

“Good morning,” she said with that same smile she’d had the day before. She held a cup carrier in one hand, with two paper cups of something in it, and a brown paper bag in her other.

“What’s all this?”

“Well, this”—she raised the cup carrier—“is a black tea for you, and a matcha latte for me. And these”—she shook the brown paper bag in front of my face—“are a few donuts. I didn’t

know which types you liked, so I got a vanilla frosted, strawberry frosted, rainbow sprinkles, double chocolate—”

“Come in.” I opened the door wider for her, and she rushed in, as if I might rescind the offer.

We walked down the hallway to the dining room. I grabbed some plates and a knife to split the donuts, and we sat across from each other.

“Bon appétit.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

After a few minutes, she looked up at me. “So, do you have a phone book?”

“A phone book? I don’t know. I’m sure my pops kept some old ones lying around, but they’d be decades old. Why?”

She wiped strawberry frosting from her mouth and stood. “I’ll be back.”

A little over an hour had passed, and I wasn’t sure if she’d return. I showered and brushed my teeth—just in case, you know—and when I walked back downstairs, she was in the living room. No knock. No ringing the doorbell. Nothing. We’d only been getting to know each other for about twenty-four hours, but she already acted like a close friend. If it were anyone else, it would have been an intrusion, but, with her, all of this—the tea, the donuts, the walking inside my house—was soothing.

“A phone book,” she said, holding up what was, indeed, a thick Whitepages.

“Where in the world?”

“I had to go all the way to Park Slope, to one of those niche magazine shops. But they had one.”

“And what are we going to do with that?”

“Well,” she said, a mischievous grin on her face. “I’m glad you asked. After we split up yesterday, I kept thinking about what you said. ‘Everything has its rightful place.’ And I was thinking we could try to find Christopher Plank’s relatives and give them the pocket watch.”

I didn’t know if I was ready to give up the pocket watch yet, but I also didn’t want to disappoint her. More important than all of that was that I wanted another reason to spend time with her, so if she wanted to play detective, we could play detective.

“Okay. Where do we start?”

“The pocket watch has Baltimore in it, right? But you found it in the Coney Island Creek. So I’m thinking that whoever this Christopher Plank was moved from Baltimore to New York, and that, if he has any relatives, they’ll still be here. Look”—she already had the page open to “P,” her index finger running up and down a column—“there are over one-hundred Planks in New York. Let’s split the list in half and see what we discover.”

“Sure.”

She focused on one page, and I focused on the other. Four hours later, we had nothing, except dozens of hang-ups, folks saying “I don’t want to buy anything,” with varying levels of anger; and people who had a “Christopher Plank” in their family, but no knowledge of an ancestor from the 1800s who owned a gold pocket watch.

“It was a good try,” I said, my back against the couch cushion, arms stretched out in both directions.

“Let’s not give up.” She leaned back, and I almost pulled away when her neck found my forearm, but I didn’t dare.

“This is like finding a needle in a haystack, though. It would take days, maybe weeks, for us to go through every Plank in America.”

“Probably, but how about we just focus on Maryland to save time?”

“I don’t know. This was fun, and I do appreciate the effort, but I’m tired. Why don’t we just order pizza and watch a movie?”

She laughed. “No, no, no. This isn’t time for Netflix and chill, sir. But okay, let’s try this. We use the Whitepages website to see if there are any Christopher Planks in Maryland, and, if there are, we call them. Then”—she mimed wiping her hands clean— “we’re done. And we’ll never speak about it again.”

“Wait, there’s a Whitepages website? Why didn’t we just use that in the first place?”

“Because that would have been too easy.” She tapped her temple a few times. “*Duh.*”

I shook my head, and she followed up with, “I’ll also pay for the pizza *and* let you pick the movie. This is an offer you can’t refuse.”

She was right, there was no way I could say no. She had an aura about her that made me believe, in some small way, that it was possible. That no matter how vast the task was, not trying would be worse than failing. It reminded me of Pops, and I thought about how better our relationship would have been if I’d agreed with him more, instead of fighting him at every turn.

“Fine,” I said. “We do this and we’re done.”

I opened my laptop, and the Whitepages website showed us five Christopher Planks in Maryland. *Thank God.* But getting their numbers wasn’t free, so, after paying for access, we went down the list. The first two numbers were disconnected. The third was a teenager who

didn't know anyone else named Christopher in his family. On the fourth call, a woman picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, I'm looking for Christopher Plank."

"This is her girlfriend, how may I help you?"

"I know that this is strange, and I promise I'm not playing a prank, but I found a gold pocket watch in Brooklyn, and when I opened it up, it said 'Christopher Plank' and 'Baltimore, 1897.' I'm looking for its owner, so may I please speak with Christopher?"

The line went quiet, then she said, "She's out of town. But I'll give her your number, and if she wants, she'll call you, okay?"

Melissa shook my shoulder and I had to place my hand on her knee to steady her. I mean, I guess I didn't *have* to, but she let me. A tide of excitement broke against the shores of my heart, and I did nothing to push it back.

"Yeah, thank you."

Once I hung up, Melissa shot up and began snapping her fingers, swaying her hips, and turning under the too-white light of our bronze chandelier. "Come and dance with me!" she ordered.

"But there's no music. And, plus, we don't even know if this is the right Christopher."

"Who cares? It's something, which is better than nothing. And you don't need music to dance, silly. Also, word to the wise: if a woman asks you to dance, you dance."

So we danced. Our socked-feet glided across the carpet. The creaking floorboard was our music. The chandelier served as our disco ball, its lights bouncing off the framed photographs of

saxophonists wailing, women carrying baskets on their heads, and military-like columns of stone-faced Black Panthers. People stopped on the sidewalk to watch us through the big bay windows. We continued to twist and twirl after the sun bowed out in place of its lunar companion.

And then we got the call.

I stared at the phone in my hand, afraid of what waited on the other side.

“Pick it up! Pick it up!” Melissa shouted. But I couldn’t, so she swiped her finger across the screen, lifted the phone to my mouth, and pinched my neck.

“Ow!”

“Hello?”

“Hello, is this Christopher?”

“Chris, yeah,” the person on the other end said.

“Sorry. Chris. I called because—”

“You actually have the pocket watch?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Send me a photo.”

I’d never taken a photo of it, because there wasn’t any reason to, so I tapped my camera app, held the pocket watch in front of me, and took a photo of it. Melissa opened it, presented its engraved inside to my camera as if she was some type of hand model, and then I sent both photos to Chris.

“Hello?” I said.

“I’m here. How did you find it?”

I didn't know if she was even the rightful owner, so I kept it vague and only mentioned finding it in the water near Coney Island.

She responded with an equally vague grunt, then said, "What do you want for it?"

A good question, I guess. But an exchange never even crossed my mind. I didn't need or want money. There was nothing I could do to bring Pops back. And if the pocket watch actually did belong to Chris, or one of her relatives, I couldn't, in good conscience, ask for anything in return.

"Nothing. I just want to make sure it gets to the right person."

"Then you're going to have to come to Wisconsin. Like, tomorrow."

I turned to Melissa, and, for the first time, I saw her eyes narrow and nose wrinkle in confusion. She shrugged and nodded. I took that to mean, "Yes, let's do it," so I said, "Why Wisconsin? Your area code is in Baltimore."

"The owner of the watch lives here, but I'll explain more when I see you. United always has early morning flights for cheap into Dane County. Grab one of those, and I'll meet you at the airport. Cool?"

"Um."

"This is your one shot. It'll make more sense when we meet, so text me your arrival time after you book. But if I don't hear from you, this is the end."

Chris hung up, and before I could process what was going on, Melissa threw her arms around my neck and squeezed so tightly I thought I was going to suffocate.

"Adventure time!" she screamed, rocking me back and forth.

I pried her arms from me, sucked in a deep breath of air, and said, “You sure about this? We don’t know who she is, or if this even belongs to her family.”

“So what? What else do you have going on?”

“Sure, but what about you and class?”

“I’ll get the notes from a friend. Come on, don’t overthink this. Let’s grab these flights and a hotel for the night. If we need to stay longer, we can. Say yes. Actually”—she brought her soft palm to my cheek and chills rippled up and down my spine—“it doesn’t matter what you say, because we’re going.”

“Fine. Here.” I handed her my AMEX. “No use for you to miss class and spend your own money on this.”

She looked down, then up. “Platinum, huh? Baller. But, okay.”

With the flights and hotel booked, she went back to her dorm, and we agreed to meet at LaGuardia at 5:30 a.m. I barely slept, and less than twelve hours later, we were checking in for our flight—only a backpack on each of us, but we couldn’t stop smiling. The flight went by in an instant because we’d fallen asleep before takeoff—her head on my shoulder, my head on her head—and only woke up when the plane touched down.

Once cell service came back, my phone buzzed with a text from Chris: *At arrivals now. Camo jacket with camo beanie.*

As promised, she was there. A short woman with a round face and tiny eyes that shone like obsidian. And she really was dressed in camo from the beanie on her head to the fatigue pants that fed into her shiny black boots. Yeah, I didn’t want to mess with her.

“Hey.” I extended a hand toward her, and she looked at it for a moment too long before she shook it, raising her head to make direct eye contact with me the whole time.

Melissa, either not feeling the same vibes I was, or not caring, hugged Chris before she could protest, and, even if it was just for a second, I saw her face soften before turning into cement again.

“Come on, let’s grab some coffee and talk.” She walked in front of us, charting a channel in the sea of people rushing around us. We entered a Starbucks, and when I tried to pay for our coffee and tea, Chris just raised her hand, ending what could have been an awkward back and forth.

Melissa had found us a spot in the corner, and I sat next to her. Chris took the seat across from me.

Before any of us could even take a sip, Chris nodded in my direction. “Let me see it.”

“Hold on,” I said. “No offense, but we don’t know you. We don’t even know if the pocket watch belongs to you.”

She removed her beanie, revealing a buzz cut that suited her well, and laid her hands on the table. “Fair. I’ll try and make this quick, and, if you believe me, and you actually have what you say you have, we’ll go from there. Okay?”

“Okay.”

“I go by Chris, short for Christine. But I was born Christopher. Christopher Plank V. My father died before I was born, but he was also Christopher. His father, my grandfather, is Christopher; and his father and his grandfather were both Christophers. As my grandfather tells it, this watch belonged to the first Christopher. Look.”

She took out her phone, and, after a few taps, began swiping through a handful of illustrations of the pocket watch that was in my coat. The exact gold exterior, covered with a stippled pattern and an engraving of a cotton boll at the bottom. The same name, city, and date on the inside. Every Roman numeral identical.

“My grandfather’s father drew the first. Then my grandfather did. Then my father did. Then I did. It’s a weird tradition we have, like a way of keeping the watch alive, even though none of us have ever actually held it.”

That was really all the proof I needed. I took the pocket watch out, wrapped my fist around it, then held it open for Chris. Without touching it, she inspected its outside like it was an alien artifact. Then she looked up at me, and asked, “Can I?”

“It’s yours, right?”

She removed it from my hand with both of her own, clicked it open, and brought it very close to her face.

“This is it,” she whispered. “I can’t believe it.”

I heard sniffing and turned to find Melissa with tears streaking down her face. “I’m sorry. It’s just—this is a bit overwhelming, isn’t it?” Our hands found each other’s on the table, and I could feel her pulse, heavy and fast.

“Man,” Chris said. “This is unreal. But let’s go, we don’t have much time.” She stood and handed the pocket watch back to me. “Hold onto it a little longer. Cool?”

“Sure.”

We followed her out of the airport and grabbed her Jeep from the parking garage. To say it was beat up would be an understatement. Patches of rust covered it like a bad rash, and when she twisted the key in the ignition, it sounded like the engine was saying, “Please! Kill me now!”

Chris looked at me and let out a little laugh. “It gets the job done.”

Honestly, there wasn’t much to see on the drive. We passed a spray tanning salon, a gray-looking set of brick buildings that Chris said was the National Guard Armory, Madison College, and then, once we hit 151, a series of American gourmet to our left and our right: Popeyes, Chick-fil-A, McDonald’s, Portillo’s Hot Dogs, and Panera Bread. We got off, and, after taking a curved road, stopped in the parking lot of yet another brick building. At least this one had windows stretching up and across its facade.

She turned the car off and just sat there with her eyes on her lap. “Listen. I don’t know what’s going to happen in there, so I just want to say, right now, that I appreciate you coming all the way out here. You didn’t have to, but you did. And I’m grateful.”

I wasn’t sure what she was talking about, but it felt like I was back on the *Cinqué Express* with Pops, the ocean stretching as far as we could see, our eyes cast on lightless depths with the hope that something, anything, would reveal itself to us. The water had a heart of its own and, sometimes, it thrashed ships and dragged their unlucky souls to places where they would never be found. My instinct was to seize up and tread carefully, but Pops always said, “Stay alert, but also stay loose,” so I forced myself to relax.

Melissa placed a hand on Chris’s back and rubbed. “Of course.”

We got out of the car and followed Chris inside the building. The too-bright fluorescent lights were what hit me first. Then the strange smell of antiseptic and lavender. And, finally, music—a calming piano that poured from small speakers attached to the white walls.

“Careful,” a woman sitting behind a wooden reception desk said. She pointed to the yellow sign standing on the floor that read, “CAUTION Wet Floor.” We slowed down, and then stopped in front of the reception.

The receptionist pushed long, brown coils behind her ears and gave us a half-hearted smile. “Hey, Chris.”

“Hey, Jen.”

“Family from out of town?”

Chris looked at us, then back at Jen. “You could say that. Any news?”

Jen moved her lips to the side of her face and shook her head. “You always know what I know, baby. He’s sleeping now, but maybe you can wake him for a bit.”

“Thanks, Jen.”

Melissa and I muttered thank yous and followed Chris down the main hallway—still careful not to slip on the green-and-white-tiled floor—until we reached an elevator, which brought us to the second floor.

The music here was still piano-heavy, but there was also now the sound of strings being plucked; soft notes, like what you’d imagine playing in Eden, floating through the air, spreading calm, serenity, and an overall feeling of well-being. Aside from the music, the floor was mostly quiet—a few nurses, with clipboards in hand, checking on patients; families of two, three, and

four entering rooms with flowers; solitary visitors dabbing their eyes with tissues, and doing their best to retain some sense of composure before, or after, seeing their loved ones.

Chris brought us to a room at the end of the hall, and gently opened the door. It was like we were in another world. Hardwood floors, a nightstand with a lamp on top of it, natural light entering from the window on the far side with a deep blue armchair and a cushioned wooden chair in front of it. There was also a large plant whose name I still don't know, and on the walls were two framed paintings—obviously prints—one depicting a peaceful pasture and another featuring a quaint wooden bridge with a field of water lilies floating below it. In the room's center was a hospital bed, disguised as a regular bed, with an ocean blue blanket. And there was an elderly man, with gray hair and liquid-filled tubes running from his arms, sleeping beneath it.

“This is my grandfather,” Chris whispered, quietly closing the door behind us.

“Christopher Plank III.”

She motioned for us to round the bed and take a seat. Melissa sat in the armchair. I took the wooden chair, and noticed how still and unbothered the man looked. One hand, with a tube attached to its back, rested on top of the other on his stomach. A machine to his right beeped every few seconds, and on the machine's black screen was the rising and falling of what I assumed to be his vital signs.

“What's wrong with him?” Melissa whispered.

Chris smoothed his long gray hair back, then kissed his forehead. “Just old age. He went blind a month ago. His liver is failing. His heart is losing strength. He's been here for about two months, which is longer than I anticipated. It's like he's holding on, when what would be best is for him to finally let go.”

She took his face into her hands, and said, “Grandpa.” His eyes fluttered a bit, then he brought his wrinkly hands to her own.

“Chris,” he whispered, more breath than sound in his voice.

“Hi, Grandpa. How are you today?” She took a cup of water from his nightstand and touched the straw to his lips. He sucked what he could, then sighed.

“Thank you, dear. Still here.”

“You are. And I’ve brought two friends with me, Grandpa. They wanted to meet you.”

He raised his hands and found Melissa’s face. “Nice to meet you, young lady.”

“Nice to meet you too, sir.”

He moved his hands from Melissa and I met them with my face, which he ran his paper-like fingertips over. “And you, young man.”

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Plank.”

“They found the watch, Grandpa. That’s why they’re here.”

He opened his eyes, and I saw two milky cataracts. It looked as if he wanted to sit up, but there was no way he’d be able to do that, so Chris helped him straighten his back, and placed a large pillow behind him.

“Is it the real watch, Chris?” There was more strength in his voice now, the excitement obvious. The green lines on the black screen became more jagged, and I was afraid he was going to die right there.

“It is, Grandpa. I saw it.”

She nodded at me, and I took the watch from my coat pocket and placed it in Mr. Plank’s open palms. He rubbed his thumb against the outside, nodding, and emitting an *Mmmhm*. Then

he turned it over, felt the backside, and, finally, used all the strength he had in both thumbs to press the crown, which opened it with a dull click. He pressed his index finger to the engraving inside, moving it to the left and to the right, and looked up at me.

“But how?”

As I told him the story, Mr. Plank nodded along, then, when I was finished, he asked Chris for a sip of water. He wiggled his back against the pillow behind him, working to get comfortable, and signaled his minor achievement with a grunt.

“It belonged to my grandfather, Christopher Plank II, and was given to him by his father, Christopher Plank I. They were freemen, on account of my great-great-grandfather, Robert Plank, who, even before the Emancipation Proclamation, had saved enough money to free himself, his wife, and his son and purchase some land in Virginia.

Robert was a strict man. Gifted, but strict. He could tend to all kinds of crops and livestock, as well as people. My grandfather said that his grandfather’s hands were as deft as his mind”—Mr. Plank held his own hands out to us and smiled—“which was why he was able to accrue funds so quickly, all with the permission of his master, Neville Plank, and then secure his freedom and the land that allowed him to create real wealth.”

“What a man,” Melissa said, already just as immersed in the story as I was.

“What a man indeed. And before Robert died, he made sure that his son, Christopher, was even better than him at all aspects of their businesses, which had grown from cane and tobacco to furniture and blacksmithing, for both Black and white folk alike. All of this made it difficult for Christopher to tear himself away from work, but his wife, Deborah, begged him for a holiday in New York. So after years of saying no, he finally said yes. My grandfather, Christopher Plank

II”—he stopped to catch his breath, and when he faced me to continue, it looked like the clouds in his eyes had somehow cleared a bit—“My grandfather, Christopher Plank II, was ten-years-old.

Times were changing at this point. At least, people like my great-grandfather thought they were. But now Jim Crow was starting up and spreading to the North. Keep in mind that *Plessy v. Ferguson* had just recently been decided. And this pocket watch”—he exposed its inner lid and held it up for all of us to see—“was made in 1897. It was a gift to my grandfather from his father a few months before their trip to New York. Crafted in one of our smithies in Baltimore.

My grandfather said they had an incredible time, and his favorite part of the trip was ‘America’s Playground,’ Coney Island, also known as ‘Sodom by the Sea,’ and for good reason. I was just a young boy when I first heard him tell of that unforgettable vacation, but he didn’t shy away from the details of drunken men spilling out of brothels, young boys thrusting newspapers into the air, screaming the daily headlines describing the movements of mobsters, Thomas Edison’s kinetoscope, and whatever McKinley was up to. Chris, can I please have some more water?”

Mr. Plank took a long sip and Chris wiped his mouth. The fact that I’d never be able to do that with Pops tugged at my heart then, and I had to do everything in my power not to cry, but it was hard. Fortunately, Mr. Plank started up again, transporting us from a hospice in Wisconsin back to the Coney Island Boardwalk of 1897.

“But,” he said. “At one point he got lost in a wave of people that carried him away from his parents and deposited him right in front of the Switchback Gravity Railway, the first roller

coaster built in America. My grandfather craned his neck as he watched men, women, and children climb a fifty-foot high platform in order to just board the ride. And, as he was trying to fathom this marvel that was so far from the place he called home, he felt a push from the back.

There, when he turned around, was a group of five or six white boys who, according to him, were dressed in rags.”

“No!” Melissa shouted, scaring everyone in the room. Her hands covered her mouth in pure horror. I wanted to laugh, but it would have been more than inappropriate, so I just laid my hand on her leg, and she calmed down.

“Yes,” Mr. Plank continued. “He, in his three-piece tailored suit, with a gold chain hanging across the front, must have inspired the greatest surge of anger in them. The leader, who was the shortest of the group, ordered my grandfather to give up his pocket watch. When he refused, they began to chase him, and he eventually tripped on the pier, the pocket watch flying from his suit and crashing into the Atlantic. He just sat there and cried, and the boys left him be. My great-grandfather and grandmother found him minutes later, and, after hearing about the boys, brushed him off and brought him to the newly-constructed Sea Lion Park.

He never did forget that pocket watch, though, and spoke about it all the way until his death. But now it’s here, right in my hand.” He smiled a toothless smile, and I imagined him as a child, first hearing this story from his grandfather. “I guess all lost things eventually find their way back. And it’s because of you two. Thank you.”

It took me a minute to realize that my cheeks, just like Melissa’s and Chris’s and Mr. Plank’s, were soaked with tears. I brought my hand to his fist wrapped around the pocket watch and held it. Chris wiped his face, and Mr. Plank said, “It’s almost like I can hear the pocket

watch ticking, and my grandfather humming, and my father, never wanting to forget how hard my ancestors had to work, sketching this watch from memory—charcoal and a sheet of rough paper in his hands. *Hm. Hey,*” he turned to me. “Would you tell me more about this mudlarking business? Sounds like something I would have loved to do when I was younger.”

So I did, even going as far as mentioning Rodney’s famous find of silicone breasts, to which Mr. Plank replied, “No kidding!” After more stories and sharing a surprisingly delicious meal of roasted sweet potatoes, grilled chicken, and charred asparagus with a spritz of lemon juice—note: hospices have the *best* food—we said our goodbyes, and Chris drove Melissa and me to our hotel. When I opened the room door, there was only one bed.

“I can take the floor,” I said.

Melissa grabbed my hand. “Don’t be silly.”

Once we shut the lights out, I fell into a deep sleep, and dreamed of my father, swiping his net in some unknown ocean, and pulling out piles of garbage that were gilded in gold.

“Look,” he said, holding a piece up to me. “Gold or garbage, it’s just a matter of perspective, son.”

The next morning, Chris offered to take us to the airport, but we hopped in a taxi and flew back to New York. I was in the window seat, and kept my eyes fixed to the view below. Melissa tapped my shoulder and asked what I was looking at.

“The water.”

“That’s nice. But there’s something I’d like. Something I’ve wanted for the last couple of days.”

“Sure. What’s that?”

“A kiss.”

I leaned toward her, and, at thirty-thousand feet in the air, we had our first kiss. Fortunately, it wouldn't be our last. I bet it'd be nice if I ended the story here, but then I'd deprive you of one of the most amazing twists.

A week later, I received a package. Inside was a note from Chris. It read: *Grandpa passed a couple days ago, but, before he did, he asked if it was okay for him to give you this, and I said yes. Thank you for helping him finally let go.*

I reached my hands into the small box, and there was the pocket watch—a physical reminder of my last day with Pops, and something that I believe contains a piece of his own spirit, along with that of every Christopher Plank who made noble somethings out of discarded nothings. It's even here with me, right now, as I type this.

You know, there's something about putting this story down that makes it feel even realer to me. Maybe Hollywood doesn't deserve it. Maybe it's meant to only live on in the memory and disappear when it's time to disappear. Maybe I'll just delete this whole document, drive my Carver back, and watch Netflix with Melissa and our newly born son. But maybe not. Because, to be honest, reliving what happened over thirteen years ago makes me think I'm due for a new adventure, and navigating the rocky, shark-filled waters of Hollywood could be just that. Who knows what I'll find?

A mudlarker's dream.