

Prologue

September 2007

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

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

Linda picked at the white fray of her cutoffs. Already she

missed New York—the city all others merely quoted, that tremendous vile heart pumping bedlam through its boroughs, whereas San Francisco was more uterine: passive, nonvital. Here the raindrops were smaller, the hustle slower, everything tolerated. And cities that tolerated everything tolerated mediocrity.

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

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

With begrudging pledges from each of her separated parents, she'd checked into a recovery center on some forested

acreage in Santa Cruz. The idea at first was to see how many people she could alienate as quickly as possible—during the icebreaker, when she was asked to name her favorite book and describe her worst date, she'd said, *I guess my worst date was the time I was raped. Oh, and my favorite book is Moby-Dick.* But when she realized that rehab counselors saw this sort of snide pushback all the time, she decided not to resist, but to cooperate. In dryout couture (hoodie, ball cap, big sunglasses), she eased into a calm routine, reading until noon, affirmations after lunch, Bikram yoga, dishwashing, and nightly group discussion. She felt gratified to be the youngest resident by far, and embraced the gooey recovery bromides with perfected camp. When a starved-eyed oxycodone addict testified about seeing the afterlife during his overdose, Linda described her own bodily ascent to heaven on the backs of two angels. At group prayer, she seized people's shoulders and babbled in tongues. *You've come so far on your journey*, her counselor told her at the end of the month.

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

She wasn't trying to impress them or anything, she was just trying to make this whole trip less boring. Seeing her college friends after two years made her sad. It was clear now that they'd all avoided experiences, capitulated on their desires, afraid of disturbing their little routines. Linda had always had older friends, since she'd skipped two grades, and though she'd just turned twenty-one, really she'd been twenty-one since she was fourteen. But her friends were in such a weird hurry to turn thirty—not older, just *old*. When she'd moved here a few months ago, she'd thought Will and Cory would

show her around, but she'd had to drag *them* to parties instead, where they'd form a sullen huddle and complain about how loud the music was, until either they left or Linda ditched them. It was super inconvenient, since by two A.M. she'd need a place to crash—she hadn't yet told them she was technically homeless—and she'd have to go home with some desperate creeper.

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

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

the McSweeney's tweehouse of interns was that they had nice packaging.

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

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

Usually she'd disguise her rants by talking about her job as an event promoter for a nonprofit, Socialize. They threw fundraising events for good causes, hiring local bands and drag queens to perform at their rallies, events that were totally every bit as good as Linda's stupid parties. Though, yes, throwing parties for money was somewhat cynical, and presumed that young people cared about progress only insofar as they could still have fun. Did people think it was enough to "be liberal"?

To feel bad but do nothing? That was of a piece with America's double exceptionalism: how you judged your nation as the most godblessed or goddamned on earth, but also stood apart from it. The body politic had become so fat, so lumpen, that it needed morality *incentivized*.

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

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

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

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

Henrik, though, napping beside Cory? He was nice, considerate, sincere, even sexy in his big-bear way, and he'd never

oppress you with narcissistic drama. Though in college, he'd decided to date Linda. He was a man; men liked Linda. Anyway, even niceness wasn't enough. *Nice*: from *nescire*, to not know. People *should* know! They *knew* they should know, and didn't! It was one thing to try to inform annoyed pedestrians about marriage equality, prison reform, the Ellis Act, minimum wage—but her *friends*? They'd all agree war sucks, Bush is evil, whatever, but try getting them to canvass their own goddamn corner on a Saturday afternoon.

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

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

Dating was no easier. She always got dumped for precisely

her best qualities—dedication, intensity. Like when she'd skipped her own lunches to deliver surprise sandwiches to her last boyfriend's office and he said she was smothering him. She wanted to try dating women, but she didn't have time to figure out the Bay Area dyke scene, which was cool but sort of cliquy and mannered. She hated thinking that moral purpose asphyxiated relationships, but there it was.

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

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

Not much Will could say to that—because that was *exactly* what he wanted, but admitting that would look needy. What

if he'd manned up and stood his ground? *Vanya, a promise is a promise, so go get your fucking towel.* No, he'd just send her rolling into the arms of one of those white techbro jags who were always leaving flirty comments on her Facebook and demoing their beta apps for her at parties while Will stood by flexing a red cup in his hand.

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

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

He'd met Vanya at a house party last summer, when he saw

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Will, at least put away—"

"Yo, can I *drive*?"

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

If it came down to picking between friends like Cory, who bossed him around and only hung out when it was convenient

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

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

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

had just laughed and said, *Oookay, Henrik's being weird again*, in that way people tended to talk about him behind his back right to his face.

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

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

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

All his friends had become self-sufficient adults, and he'd

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

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

By the time they pulled into the parking lot Henrik was asleep again, until Cory nudged his knee with hers. Daylight reddened through his eyelids. The sandy asphalt crackled beneath the gray Camry's tires as Will parked and cut the engine.

Doors opened and the clammy scent of seawater blew through. Linda blocked her fluttering eyes against the sun, tried putting her sunglasses on before realizing they were on. Her palms numb from the car seat's vibration. Substances unpleasantly metabolized. Exhaling, Cory took Henrik's elbow and told him to leave his homework in the car. Bones reordered in backs, legs under shorts felt the breeze freshen their sweat. They walked out between the bollards and across the spilled edge of sand, through dune grass yielding ticklishly underfoot. If Vanya had come they would be stopping here to collapse her wheelchair and carry her, because she was still weak in that way, no matter what.

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