From A Visit From the Goon Squad by Jennifer Egan, 2010.

13

Pure Language

"You don't want to do this," Bennie murmured. "Am I right?"

"Absolutely," Alex said.

"You think it's selling out. Compromising the ideals that make you, 'you.'"

Alex laughed. "I know that's what it is."

"See, you're a purist," Bennie said. "That's why you're perfect for this."

Alex felt the flattery working on him like the first sweet tokes of a joint you know will destroy you if you smoke it all. The long awaited brunch with Bennie Salazar was winding down, and Alex's hyper-rehearsed pitch to be hired as a mixer had already flopped. But now, as they eyed each other from lean perpendicular couches doused in winter sun that poured from a skylight in Bennie's Tribeca loft, Alex felt the sudden, riveting engagement of the older man's curiosity. Their wives were in the kitchen; their baby daughters were between them on a red Persian carpet, warily sharing a kitchen set.

"If I won't do it," Alex said, "then I can't really be perfect."

"I think you will."

Alex was annoyed, intrigued. "How come?"

"A feeling," Bennie said, rousing himself slightly from his deep recline. "That we have some history together that hasn't happened yet."

Alex had first heard Bennie Salazar's name from a girl he'd dated once, when he was new to New York and Bennie was still famous. The girl had worked for him—Alex remembered this clearly—but it was practically all

he could remember; her name, what she'd looked like, what exactly they'd done together—those details had been erased. The only impressions Alex retained of their date involved winter, darkness, and something about a *wallet*, of all things, but had it been lost? Found? Stolen? The girl's wallet, or his own? The answers were maddeningly absent—it was like trying to remember a song that you knew made you feel a certain way, without a title, artist, or even a few bars to bring it back. The girl hovered just beyond reach, having left the wallet in Alex's brain as a kind of calling card, to tease him. In the days leading up to this brunch with Bennie, Alex had found himself oddly fixated on her.

"Das mine!" protested Ava, Bennie's daughter, affirming Alex's recent theory that language acquisition involved a phase of speaking German. She snatched a plastic skillet away from his own daughter, Cara-Ann, who lurched after it, roaring, "Mine pot! Mine pot!" Alex jumped to his feet, then noticed that Bennie hadn't stirred. He forced himself to sit back down.

"I know you'd rather mix," Bennie said, somehow audible over the caterwauling without seeming to raise his voice. "You love music. You want to work with sound. You think I don't know what that feels like?"

The girls fell on each other in a gladiatorial frenzy of yowling, scratching, and yanking wisps of fledgling hair. "Everything okay in there?" Alex's wife, Rebecca, called from the kitchen.

"We're good," Alex called back. He marveled at Bennie's calm; was this how it was when you started the kid thing all over again after a second marriage?

"The problem is," Bennie went on, "it's not about sound anymore. It's not about *music*. It's about reach. That's the bitter fucking pill I had to swallow."

"I know."

Meaning: he knew (as did everyone in the industry) how Bennie had gotten canned from his own label, Sow's Ear Records, many years ago, after serving his corporate controllers a boardroom lunch of cow pies ("and we're talking *in the steam trays*," wrote a secretary who'd narrated the melee in real time on Gawker). "You're asking me to feed the people shit?" Bennie had allegedly roared at the appalled executives. "Try eating some yourselves and see how it tastes!" After that, Bennie had returned to producing music with a raspy, analog sound, none of which had really sold. Now, pushing sixty, he was seen as irrelevant; Alex usually heard him referred to in the past tense.

When Cara-Ann sank her freshly minted incisors into Ava's shoulder,

it was Rebecca who rushed in from the kitchen and pried her off, casting a mystified look at Alex, now suspended in Zen-like serenity upon the couch. Lupa came with her: the dark-eyed mother Alex had avoided in playgroup at first because she was beautiful, until he'd learned she was married to Bennie Salazar.

When wounds had been bandaged and order restored, Lupa kissed Bennie's head (his trademark bushy hair now silver), and said, "I keep waiting for you to play Scotty."

Bennie smiled up at his much younger wife. "I've been saving him," he said. Then he worked his handset, untapping from the staggering sound system (which seemed to route the music straight through Alex's pores) a baleful male vocalist accompanied by torqued, boinging slide guitar. "We released this a couple of months ago," Bennie said. "You've heard of him, Scotty Hausmann? He's doing well with the pointers."

Alex glanced over at Rebecca, who scorned the term "pointer" and would politely but firmly correct anyone who used it to describe Cara-Ann. Luckily, his wife hadn't heard. Now that Starfish, or kiddie handsets, were ubiquitous, any child who could point was able to download music—the youngest buyer on record being a three-month-old in Atlanta, who'd purchased a song by Nine Inch Nails called "Ga-ga." Fifteen years of war had ended with a baby boom, and these babies had not only revived a dead industry but become the arbiters of musical success. Bands had no choice but to reinvent themselves for the preverbal; even Biggie had released yet another posthumous album whose title song was a remix of a Biggie standard, "Fuck You, Bitch," to sound like "You're Big, Chief!" with an accompanying picture of Biggie dandling a toddler in Native American headdress. Starfish had other features—finger drawing, GPS systems for babies just learning to walk, PicMail—but Cara-Ann had never touched one, and Rebecca and Alex had agreed that she would not until age five. They used their own handsets sparingly in front of her.

"Listen to this guy," Bennie said. "Just listen."

The mournful vibrato; the jangly quaver of slide guitar—to Alex it sounded dire. But this was Bennie Salazar, who'd discovered the Conduits all those years ago. "What do *you* hear?" Alex asked him.

Bennie shut his eyes, every part of him alive with the palpable act of listening. "He's absolutely pure," he said. "Untouched."

Alex closed his own eyes. Immediately sounds thickened in his ears: choppers, church bells, a distant drill. The usual confetti of horns and sirens. The tingle of track lighting overhead, a dishwasher slop. Cara-

Ann's sleepy "No . . ." as Rebecca pulled on her sweater. They were about to go. Alex felt a spasm of dread, or something like it, at the thought of leaving this brunch with Bennie Salazar empty-handed.

He opened his eyes. Bennie's were already open, his brown, tranquil gaze fixed on Alex's face. "I think you hear what I hear, Alex," he said. "Am I right?"

That night, when Rebecca and Cara-Ann were firmly asleep, Alex extracted himself from the porridgy warmth of their shared bed in its foam of mosquito netting and went to the living room/playroom/guest room/office. When he stood close to the middle window and looked straight up, he could see the top of the Empire State Building, lit tonight in red and gold. This wedge of view had been a selling point back when Rebecca's parents had bought her the Garment District one-bedroom many years ago, right after the crash. Alex and Rebecca had planned to sell the apartment when she got pregnant, then learned that the squat building their own overlooked had been bought by a developer who planned to raze it and build a skyscraper that would seal off their air and light. The apartment became impossible to sell. And now, two years later, the skyscraper had at last begun to rise, a fact that filled Alex with dread and doom but also a vertiginous sweetness—every instant of warm sunlight through their three east-facing windows felt delicious, and this sliver of sparkling night, which for years he'd watched from a cushion propped against the sill, often while smoking a joint, now appeared agonizingly beautiful, a mirage.

Alex loved the dead of night. Without the rant of construction and omnipresent choppers, hidden portals of sound opened themselves to his ears: the teakettle whistle and sock-footed thump of Sandra, the single mother who lived in the apartment overhead; a hummingbird thrum that Alex presumed was her teenage son masturbating to his handset in the adjacent room. From the street, a single cough, errant conversational strands: " . . . you're asking me to be a different person . . ." and "Believe it or not, drinking keeps me clean."

Alex leaned against his cushion and lit up a joint. He'd spent the afternoon trying—and failing—to tell Rebecca what he'd agreed to do for Bennie Salazar. Bennie had never used the word "parrot"; since the Bloggescandals, the term had become an obscenity. Even the financial disclosure statements that political bloggers were required to post hadn't

stemmed the suspicion that people's opinions weren't really their own. "Who's paying you?" was a retort that might follow any bout of enthusiasm, along with laughter—who would let themselves be bought? But Alex had promised Bennie fifty parrots to create "authentic" word of mouth for Scotty Hausmann's first live concert, to be held in Lower Manhattan next month.

Using his handset, he began devising a system for selecting potential parrots from among his 15,896 friends. He used three variables: how much they needed money ("Need"), how connected and respected they were ("Reach"), and how open they might be to selling that influence ("Corruptibility"). He chose a few people at random and ranked them in each category on a scale from 10 to 0, then graphed the results on his handset in three dimensions, looking for a cluster of dots where the three lines intersected. But in every case, scoring well in two categories meant a terrible score in the third: poor and highly corruptible people—his friend Finn, for example, a failed actor and quasi–drug addict who'd posted a recipe for speedballs on his page and lived mostly off the goodwill of his former Wesleyan classmates (Need: 9; Corruptibility: 10) had no reach (1). Poor, influential people like Rose, a stripper/cellist whose hairstyle changes were instantly copied in certain parts of the East Village (Need: 9; Reach: 10) were incorruptible (0)—in fact, Rose kept a rumor sheet on her page that functioned as an informal police blotter, recording which friend's boyfriend had given her a black eye, who had borrowed and trashed a drum set, whose dog had been left tied to a parking meter for hours in the rain. There were influential and corruptible people like his friend Max, onetime singer for the Pink Buttons, now a wind-power potentate who owned a Soho triplex and threw a caviar-strewn Christmas party each year that had people kissing his ass from August onward in hopes of being invited (Reach: 10; Corruptibility: 8). But Max was popular *because he was rich* (Need: 0) and had no incentive to sell.

Alex stared goggle-eyed at his handset screen. Would anyone agree to do this? And then it came to him that someone already had: himself. Alex graphed himself as he might appear to Rebecca: Need: 9; Reach: 6; Corruptibility: 0. Alex was a purist, like Bennie had said; he'd walked away from sleazy bosses (in the *music* business) just as he now routinely walked away from women who were drawn to the sight of a man caring for his baby daughter during business hours. Hell, he'd met Rebecca after trying to chase down a guy in a wolf mask who'd snatched her purse the day before Halloween. But Alex had caved to Bennie Salazar without

a fight. Why? Because his apartment would soon be dark and airless? Because being with Cara-Ann while Rebecca worked full-time teaching and writing had made him restless? Because he never could quite forget that every byte of information he'd posted online (favorite color, vegetable, sexual position) was stored in the databases of multinationals who swore they would never, ever use it—that he was *owned*, in other words, having sold himself unthinkingly at the very point in his life when he'd felt most subversive? Or was it the odd symmetry of having first heard Bennie Salazar's name from that lost girl he'd dated once, at the very beginning, and now meeting Bennie at last, a decade and a half later, through *playgroup*?

Alex didn't know. He didn't need to know. What he needed was to find fifty more people like him, who had stopped being themselves without realizing it.

"Physics is required. Three semesters. If you fail, you're out of the program."

"For a *marketing degree*?" Alex was dumbfounded.

"It used to be epidemiology," Lulu said. "You know, when the viral model was still current."

"Don't people still say 'viral'?" Alex was wishing he'd had a real cup of coffee, not the swill they were pouring at this Greek diner. Bennie's assistant, Lulu, appeared to have had fifteen or twenty—unless this was her personality.

"No one says 'viral' anymore," Lulu said. "I mean, maybe thoughtlessly, the way we still say 'connect' or 'transmit'—those old mechanical metaphors that have nothing to do with how information travels. See, reach isn't describable in terms of cause and effect anymore: it's simultaneous. It's faster than the speed of light, that's actually been measured. So now we study particle physics."

"What next? String theory?"

"That's an elective."

Lulu was in her early twenties, a graduate student at Barnard *and* Bennie's full-time assistant: a living embodiment of the new "handset employee": paperless, deskless, commuteless, and theoretically omnipresent, though Lulu appeared to be ignoring a constant chatter of handset beeps and burps. The photos on her page had not done justice to the arresting, wide-eyed symmetry of her face, the radiant shine of her hair.

She was "clean": no piercings, tattoos, or scarifications. All the kids were now. And who could blame them, Alex thought, after watching three generations of flaccid tattoos droop like moth-eaten upholstery over poorly stuffed biceps and saggy asses?

Cara-Ann was asleep in her sling, her face wedged in the slot between Alex's jaw and collarbone, her fruity, biscuity breath filling his nostrils. He had thirty minutes, maybe forty-five, before she would wake up wanting lunch. Yet Alex felt a perverse need to go backward, to understand Lulu, to pinpoint why exactly she disconcerted him.

"How did you find your way to Bennie?" he asked.

"His ex-wife used to work for my mom," Lulu said, "years ago, when I was a little girl. I've known Bennie forever—and his son, Chris. He's two years older than me."

"Huh," Alex said. "And what does your mom do?"

"She was a publicist, but she left the business," Lulu said. "She lives upstate."

"What's her name?"

"Dolly."

Alex was inclined to pursue this line of questioning back to the moment of Lulu's conception, but stopped himself. A silence fell, punctuated by the arrival of their food. Alex had meant to order soup, but that had seemed spineless, so at the last minute he'd gone for a Reuben sandwich, forgetting that he couldn't chew without waking Cara-Ann. Lulu had ordered lemon meringue pie; she ate the meringue in tiny flecks off the prongs of her fork.

"So," she said, when Alex failed to speak up. "Bennie says we're going to make a blind team, with you as the anonymous captain."

"He used those terms?"

Lulu laughed. "No, those are marketing terms. From school."

"Actually, they're sports terms. From . . . sports," Alex said. He'd been a team captain many times, though in the presence of someone so young it felt too long ago to really count.

"Sports metaphors still work," Lulu reflected.

"So this is a known thing?" he asked. "The *blind team*?" Alex had thought it was his own brain wave: reduce the shame and guilt of parrothood by assembling a team that doesn't know it's a team—or that it has a captain. Each team member would deal individually with Lulu, with Alex orchestrating in secret from above.

"Oh, sure," Lulu said. "BTs—blind teams—work especially well with older people. I mean"— she smiled—"people over thirty."

"And why is that?"

"Older people are more resistant to . . ." She seemed to falter.

"Being bought?"

Lulu smiled. "See, that's what we call a disingenuous metaphor," she said. "DMs look like descriptions, but they're really judgments. I mean, is a person who sells oranges *being bought*? Is the person who repairs appliances *selling out*?"

"No, because what they do is up front," Alex said, aware that he was condescending. "It's out in the open."

"And, see, those metaphors—'up front' and 'out in the open'—are part of a system we call atavistic purism. AP implies the existence of an ethically perfect state, which not only doesn't exist and never existed, but it's usually used to shore up the prejudices of whoever's making the judgments."

Alex felt Cara-Ann stir against his neck, and let a long fatty piece of pastrami slide down his throat unchewed. How long had they been sitting here? Longer than he'd meant to, that was for sure, and yet Alex couldn't resist the urge to brace himself against this girl and push. Her confidence seemed more drastic than the outcome of a happy childhood; it was cellular confidence, as if Lulu were a queen in disguise, without need or wish to be recognized.

"So," he said. "You think there's nothing inherently wrong with believing in something—or saying you do—for *money*?"

"'Inherently wrong,'" she said. "Gosh, that's a great example of calcified morality. I have to remember that for my old modern ethics teacher, Mr. Bastie; he collects them. Look," she said, straightening her spine and flicking her rather grave (despite the friendly antics of her face) gray eyes at Alex, "if I believe, I believe. Who are you to judge my reasons?"

"Because if your reasons are cash, that's not belief. It's bullshit."

Lulu grimaced. Another thing about her generation: no one swore. Alex had actually heard teenagers say things like "shucks" and "golly," without apparent irony. "This is something we see a lot," Lulu mused, studying Alex. "Ethical ambivalence—we call it EA—in the face of a strong marketing action."

"Don't tell me: SMA."

"Yes," she said. "Which for you means picking the blind team. On the surface it looks like you might not even do it, you're so ambivalent, but I think it's the opposite: I think the EA is a kind of inoculation, a way of excusing yourself in advance for something you actually *want* to do. No offense," she added.

"Kind of like saying 'no offense' when you've just said something offensive?"

Lulu underwent the most extreme blush Alex had ever witnessed: a vermilion heat encompassed her face so abruptly that the effect was of something violent taking place, as if she were choking or about to hemorrhage. Alex sat up reflexively and checked on Cara-Ann. He found her eyes wide open.

"You're right," Lulu said, taking a rickety breath. "I apologize."

"No sweat," Alex said. The blush had unsettled him more than Lulu's confidence. He watched it drain from her face, leaving her skin a jarring white. "You okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine. I just get tired of talking."

"Ditto," Alex said. He felt exhausted.

"There are so many ways to go wrong," Lulu said. "All we've got are metaphors, and they're never exactly right. You can't ever just *Say. The. Thing.*"

"Hoo dat?" Cara-Ann asked, her gaze fixed on Lulu.

"That's Lulu."

"Can I just T you?" Lulu asked.

"You mean—"

"Now. Can I T you now." The question was a formality; she was already working her handset. An instant later Alex's own vibrated in his pants pocket; he had to jostle Cara-Ann to remove it.

U hav sum nAms 4 me? he read on the screen.

hEr thA r, Alex typed, and flushed the list of fifty contacts, along with notes, tips on angles of approach, and individual no-nos, into Lulu's handset.

GrAt. Il gt 2 wrk.

They looked up at each other. "That was easy," Alex said.

"I know," Lulu said. She looked almost sleepy with relief. "It's pure—no philosophy, no metaphors, no judgments."

"Unt dat," Cara-Ann said. She was pointing at Alex's handset, which he'd been using, unthinkingly, mere inches from her face.

"No," he said, suddenly anxious. "We—we have to go."

"Wait," Lulu said, seeming for the first time to notice Cara-Ann. "I'll T her."

"Uh, we don't—" but Alex felt unable to explain to Lulu the beliefs he shared with Rebecca about children and handsets. And now his own was vibrating again; Cara-Ann shrieked with delight and speared the screen with her chubby pointer. "*I* do dat," she informed him.

Litl grl, U hav a nyc dad, Alex dutifully read aloud, a blush promptly staking a claim on his own face. Cara-Ann pounded keys with the hectic fervor of a starving dog unleashed in a meat locker. Now a blooper appeared, one of the stock images people sent to kids: a lion under a sparkling sun. Cara-Ann zoomed in on different parts of the lion as if she'd been doing this since birth. Lulu T'd: *Nvr met my dad. Dyd b4 I ws brn.* Alex read this one in silence.

"Wow. I'm sorry," he said, looking up at Lulu, but his voice seemed too loud—a coarse intrusion. He dropped his eyes, and through the blender whir of Cara-Ann's pointing fingers, he managed to T: *Sad.*

Ancnt hstry, Lulu T'd back.

"Das *mine*!" Cara-Ann proclaimed with guttural indignation, stretching from her sling and stabbing her pointer at Alex's pocket. Inside it, the handset was vibrating—had been almost constantly since he and Cara-Ann had left the diner hours before. Was it possible that his daughter could feel the vibrations through his body?

"*Mine* lolli-pop!" Alex wasn't sure how she'd arrived at this name for the handset, but he certainly wasn't correcting her.

"What do you want, honeybunch?" Rebecca asked in the oversolicitous (Alex thought) way she often spoke to their daughter when she'd spent the day at work.

"Daddy lolli-pop."

Rebecca looked quizzically at Alex. "Do you have a lollipop?"

"Of course not."

They were hurrying west, trying to reach the river before sunset. The warming-related "adjustments" to Earth's orbit had shortened the winter days, so that now, in January, sunset was taking place at 4:23.

"Can I take her?" Rebecca asked.

She lifted Cara-Ann out of the sling and placed her on the sooty sidewalk. The girl took a few of her stuttering, scarecrow steps. "We'll miss it if she walks," Alex said, and Rebecca picked her up and walked more quickly. Alex had surprised his wife outside the library, something he'd begun doing often to avoid the construction noise from their apartment. But today he had an extra reason: he needed to tell her about his arrangement with Bennie. Now, without further delays.

The sun had dropped behind the water wall by the time they reached the Hudson, but when they climbed the steps to the WATERWALK! as the wall's boarded rampart was exuberantly branded, they found the sun still

poised, ruby-orange and yolklike, just above Hoboken. "Down," Cara-Ann commanded, and Rebecca released her. She ran toward the iron fence along the wall's outer edge, always jammed at this hour with people who probably (like Alex) had barely noticed sunset before the wall went up. Now they craved it. As he followed Cara-Ann into the crowd, Alex took Rebecca's hand. For as long as he'd known her, his wife had offset her sexy beauty with a pair of dorky glasses, sometimes leaning toward Dick Smart, other times Catwoman. Alex had loved the glasses for their inability to suppress Rebecca's sexy beauty, but lately he wasn't so sure; the glasses, along with Rebecca's prematurely graying hair and the fact that she was often short on sleep, threatened to reify her disguise into an identity: a fragile, harried academic slaving to finish a book while teaching two courses and chairing several committees. It was Alex's own role in this tableau that most depressed him: the aging music freak who couldn't earn his keep, sapping the life (or at least the sexy beauty) from his wife.

Rebecca was an academic star. Her new book was on the phenomenon of word casings, a term she'd invented for words that no longer had meaning outside quotation marks. English was full of these empty words—"friend" and "real" and "story" and "change"—words that had been shucked of their meanings and reduced to husks. Some, like "identity," "search," and "cloud," had clearly been drained of life by their Web usage. With others, the reasons were more complex; how had "American" become an ironic term? How had "democracy" come to be used in an arch, mocking way?

As usual, a hush enclosed the crowd in the last few seconds before the sun slipped away. Even Cara-Ann, in Rebecca's arms, went still. Alex felt the lees of sunlight on his face and closed his eyes, savoring its faint warmth, his ears full of the slosh of a passing ferry. The moment the sun had gone, everyone moved suddenly, as if a spell had broken. "Down," said Cara-Ann, and took off along the Waterwalk. Rebecca ran after her, laughing. Alex swiftly checked his handset.

JD nEds 2 thnk

Yep frm Sancho

Cal: no f-way

At each response, he experienced an alloy of emotions that had become familiar in the course of one afternoon: triumph marbled with scorn at the yeses, disappointment with an updraft of admiration at the nos. He was just beginning to type a response when he heard stamping feet, then his daughter's longing cry: "Lollllllllli-POP!" Alex flicked the handset away, but it was too late: Cara-Ann was tugging at his jeans. "Mine dat," she said.

Rebecca sidled over. "So. That's the lollipop."

"Apparently."

"You let her use it?"

"One time, okay?" But his heart was racing.

"You just changed the rules, all by yourself?"

"I didn't change them, I slipped. Okay? Am I allowed to have one goddamn slip?"

Rebecca raised an eyebrow. Alex felt her studying him. "Why now?" she asked. "Today, after all this time—I don't get it."

"There's nothing to get!" Alex barked, but he was thinking: How does she know? And then: *What* does she know?

They stood, eyeing each other in the expiring light. Cara-Ann waited quietly, the lollipop apparently forgotten. The Waterwalk was nearly empty. It was time to tell Rebecca about the deal with Bennie—now, *now!*—but Alex felt paralyzed, as if the disclosure had already been poisoned. He had a crazy wish to T Rebecca, even found himself mentally composing the message: *Nu job in th wrks—big $ pos. pls kEp opn mind.*

"Let's go," Rebecca said.

Alex lifted Cara-Ann back into the sling, and they descended the water wall into darkness. As they made their way through the gloomy streets, Alex found himself thinking of the day he and Rebecca had met. After trying and failing to run down the wolf-headed purse snatcher, Alex had coaxed her out for beers and burritos, then had sex with her on the roof of her building on Avenue D, to escape her three roommates. He hadn't known Rebecca's last name. And in that moment, without warning, Alex abruptly recalled the name of the girl who had worked for Bennie Salazar: Sasha. It came to him effortlessly, like a door falling open. *Sasha.* Alex held the name carefully in his mind, and sure enough, the first intimations of memory followed it skittishly into the light: a hotel lobby; a small, overwarm apartment. It was like trying to remember a dream. Had he fucked her? Alex figured he must have—nearly all those early dates had concluded with sex, hard as this was to fathom from his communal bed awash in the smell of baby flesh and a chemical tinge of biodegradable diaper. But Sasha refused to give ground on the question of sex; she seemed to wink at him (green eyes?) and slip away.

. . .

u herd th nUs? Alex read on his handset late one night, as he sat in his usual spot by the window.

yup i herd

The "news" was that Bennie had moved the Scotty Hausmann concert outdoors, to the Footprint, a change that would require more outreach from Alex's blind parrots (for no additional pay) so that any potential concertgoers would know where to go.

Bennie had told Alex about the venue change earlier, on the phone: "Scotty's not wild about enclosed spaces. I'm thinking he might be happier out in the open." It was the most recent in an onslaught of escalating demands and special needs. "He's a solitary person" (Bennie, explaining Scotty's need for a trailer). "He has a hard time with conversation" (why Scotty refused to do interviews). "He hasn't spent much time with children" (why Scotty might be troubled by "pointer noise"). "He's wary of technology" (why Scotty refused to narrate a stream or answer Ts sent to him by fans via the page Bennie had created for him). The guy pictured on that page—long-haired, jaunty, grinning a mouthful of porcelain and surrounded by a lot of big colorful balls—caused an itch of aggravation in Alex every time he looked at him.

wat nxt? he T'd Lulu back. *oystrs?*

only Ets chInEs

!

. . .

tel me hEs betr in prsn

nevr met

4 rEl??

shy

*#@&**

. . .

They could meander indefinitely, these conversations, and in the pauses Alex monitored his blind parrots: checking their pages and streams for raving endorsements of Scotty Hausmann, adding truants to a "violators" list. He hadn't seen or even spoken to Lulu since their meeting three weeks ago; she was a person who lived in his pocket, whom he'd ascribed her own special vibration.

Alex looked up. The construction now covered the bottom halves of his windows, its shafts and beams a craggy silhouette beyond which the prong of the Empire State Building was still just visible. In a few days, it would be gone. Cara-Ann had been frightened when the structure crawling with men had first made its jagged appearance outside their windows, and Alex had tried desperately to make a game of it. "Up goes the building!" he would say each day, as if this progress were exciting, hopeful, and Cara-Ann had taken his cue, clapping her hands and exhorting, "Up! Up!"

up gOs th bldg, he T'd Lulu now, remarking on how easily baby talk fitted itself into the crawl space of a T.

. . . *bldg?* came Lulu's response.

nxt 2 myn. no mOr Ar/lyt

cn u stp it?

tryd

cn u move?

stuk

nyc, Lulu wrote, which confused Alex at first; the sarcasm seemed unlike her. Then he realized that she wasn't saying "nice." She was saying "New York City."

The concert day was "unseasonably" warm: eighty-nine degrees and dry, with angled golden light that stabbed their eyes at intersections and stretched their shadows to absurd lengths. The trees, which had bloomed in January, were now in tentative leaf. Rebecca had stuffed Cara-Ann into a dress from last summer with a duck across the front, and with Alex, they'd joined a mass of other young families on the skyscraper corridor of Sixth Avenue, Cara-Ann riding on Alex's back in a titanium pack they'd recently bought to replace the sling. Strollers were prohibited at public gatherings—they hampered evacuation.

Alex had been debating how to propose this concert to Rebecca, but in the end he hadn't needed to; checking her handset one night after Cara-Ann was asleep, his wife had said, "Scotty Hausmann . . . that's the guy Bennie Salazar played for us, right?"

Alex felt a tiny implosion near his heart. "I think so. Why?"

"I keep hearing about this free concert he's giving on Saturday in the Footprint, for kids and adults."

"Huh."

"Might give you a way to reconnect with Bennie." She was still smarting, on Alex's behalf, over the fact that Bennie hadn't hired him. This made Alex writhe with guilt whenever the subject came up.

"True," he'd said.

"So let's go," she'd said. "Why not, if it's free?"

Past Fourteenth Street, the skyscrapers fell away, and the slanted sun was upon them, still too low in the February sky to be shielded by any visor. In the glare Alex almost failed to spot his old friend Zeus, then tried to avoid him—Zeus was one of his blind parrots. Too late; Rebecca had already called his name. Zeus's Russian girlfriend, Natasha, was with him, each of them carrying one of their six-month-old twins in a pouch.

"You going to hear Scotty?" Zeus asked, as if Scotty Hausmann were someone they both knew.

"We are," Alex said carefully. "You?"

"Hell yeah," Zeus said. "A lap steel guitar with a slide—you ever heard one live? And we're not even talking rockabilly." Zeus worked for a blood bank and, in his spare time, helped Down syndrome kids make and sell printed sweatshirts. Alex found himself searching Zeus's face for some visible sign of parrothood, but his friend seemed the same right down to his soul patch, which he'd kept all these years since they'd gone out of fashion.

"He's supposed to be really good live," said Natasha, in her strong accent.

"I heard that, too," Rebecca said. "From, like, eight different people. It's almost strange."

"Not strange," Natasha said, with a harsh laugh. "People are getting paid." Alex felt a blaze of heat in his face and found it hard to look at Natasha. Still, it was clear that she spoke without knowledge; Zeus had kept his role a secret.

"But these are people I know," Rebecca said.

It was one of those days when every intersection brings up another familiar face, old friends and friends of friends, acquaintances, and people who just look familiar. Alex had been in the city too long to know how he knew them all: clubs where he'd deejayed? The law office where he'd worked as a secretary? The pickup basketball game he'd played for years in Tompkins Square Park? He'd felt on the verge of leaving New York since the day he'd arrived, at twenty-four—even now, he and Rebecca were poised to spring at any time, should a better job come along in a cheaper place—but somehow, enough years had managed to pass that he felt like he'd seen every person in Manhattan at least once. He wondered if Sasha was somewhere in this crowd. Alex found himself searching the vaguely familiar faces for hers without knowing what she looked like, as if his reward for recognizing Sasha, all these years later, would be finding out the answer to that question.

You going south? . . . we heard about this . . . not just for pointers . . . live he's supposed to be . . .

After the ninth or tenth exchange of this kind, which happened somewhere around Washington Square, it became suddenly clear to Alex that *all* of these people, the parents and the kidless, the single and the coupled, gay and straight, clean and pierced, were on their way to hear Scotty Hausmann. *Every single one.* The discovery swept over him in a surge of disbelief, followed by a rush of ownership and power—he'd done it, Christ he was a *genius* at it—followed by queasiness (it was a triumph he wasn't proud of), followed by fear: What if Scotty Hausmann was *not* a great performer? What if he was mediocre, or worse? Followed by a self-administered poultice that arrived in the form of a brain-T: *no 1 nOs abt me. Im invysbl.*

"You okay?" Rebecca asked.

"Yeah. Why."

"You seem nervous."

"Really?"

"You're squeezing my hand," she said. Then added, smiling under her buttonhole glasses, "It's nice."

By the time they crossed Canal and entered Lower Manhattan (where the density of children was now the highest in the nation), Alex and Rebecca and Cara-Ann were part of a throng of people that overwhelmed the sidewalk and filled the streets. Traffic had stopped, and choppers were converging overhead, flogging the air with a sound Alex hadn't been able to bear in the early years—too loud, too loud—but over time he'd gotten used to it: the price of safety. Today their military cackle felt weirdly appropriate, Alex thought, glancing around him at the sea of slings and sacs and baby backpacks, older children carrying younger ones, because wasn't this a kind of army? An army of children: the incarnation of faith in those who weren't aware of having any left.

if thr r childrn, thr mst b a fUtr, rt?

Before them, the new buildings spiraled gorgeously against the sky, so much nicer than the old ones (which Alex had only seen in pictures), more like sculptures than buildings, because they were empty. Approaching them, the crowd began to slow, backing up as those in front entered the space around the reflecting pools, the density of police and security agents (identifiable by their government handsets) suddenly palpable, along with visual scanning devices affixed to cornices, lampposts, and trees. The weight of what had happened here more than twenty years ago was still faintly present for Alex, as it always was when he came to the Foot-

print. He perceived it as a sound just out of earshot, the vibration of an old disturbance. Now it seemed more insistent than ever: a low, deep thrum that felt primally familiar, as if it had been whirring inside all the sounds that Alex had made and collected over the years: their hidden pulse.

Rebecca clutched his hand, her slim fingers moist. "I love you, Alex," she said.

"Don't say it like that. Like something bad is about to happen."

"I'm nervous," she said. "Now I'm nervous, too."

"It's the choppers," Alex said.

"Excellent," Bennie murmured. "Wait right there, Alex, if you wouldn't mind. Right by that door."

Alex had left Rebecca and Cara-Ann and their friends in a multitude that had swelled into the many thousands, everyone waiting patiently—then less patiently—as the starting time of the concert came and went, watching four jumpy roadies guard the raised platform where Scotty Hausmann was supposed to play. After a T from Lulu that Bennie needed help, Alex had snaked his way through a gauntlet of security checks to Scotty Hausmann's trailer.

Inside, Bennie and an old roadie were slumped on black folding chairs. There was no sign of Scotty Hausmann. Alex's throat felt very dry. *Im invsbl*, he thought.

"Bennie, listen to me," said the roadie. His hands shook beneath the cuffs of his plaid flannel shirt.

"You can do this," Bennie said. "I'm telling you."

"Listen to me, Bennie."

"Stay by the door, Alex," Bennie said again, and he was right—Alex had been about to move closer, to ask what the fuck Bennie thought he was trying to do: put this decrepit roadie on in Scotty Hausmann's place? To *impersonate* him? A guy with gutted cheeks and hands so red and gnarled he looked like he'd have trouble playing a hand of poker, much less the strange, sensuous instrument clutched between his knees? But when Alex's eyes fell on the instrument, he suddenly knew, with an awful spasm in his gut: the decrepit roadie *was* Scotty Hausmann.

"The people are here," Bennie said. "The thing is in motion. I can't stop it."

"It's too late. I'm too old. I just—I can't."

Scotty Hausmann sounded like he'd recently wept or was on the verge of weeping—possibly both. He had shoulder-length hair slicked away from his face and empty, blasted eyes, all of it amounting to a derelict impression despite his clean shave. All Alex recognized were his teeth: white and sparkling—embarrassed-looking, as if they knew there was only so much you could do with this wreck of a face. And Alex understood that Scotty Hausmann did not exist. He was a word casing in human form: a shell whose essence has vanished.

"You *can*, Scotty—you have to," Bennie said, with his usual calm, but through his thinning silver hair Alex caught a shimmer of sweat on his crown. "Time's a goon, right? You gonna let that goon push you around?"

Scotty shook his head. "The goon won."

Benny took a long breath, a flick of eyes at his watch the only sign of his impatience. "You came to me, Scotty, remember that?" he said. "Twenty-some-odd years ago—you believe it was that long? You brought me a fish."

"Yeah."

"I thought you were going to kill me."

"I should've," Scotty said. A single hack of laughter. "I wanted to."

"And when I hit bottom—when Steph threw me out and I got fired from Sow's Ear—I tracked you down. And what did I say? You remember, when I found you fishing in the East River? Out of the blue? What did I say?"

Scotty mumbled something.

"I said, 'It's time you became a star.' And what did you say to me?" Bennie leaned close to Scotty, took the man's trembling wrists in his own, rather elegant hands, and peered into his face. "You said, 'I dare you.'"

There was a long pause. Then, without warning, Scotty leaped to his feet, upending his chair as he lunged for the trailer door. Alex was fully prepared to step aside and let him pass, but Scotty got there first and began trying to muscle him out of the way, at which point Alex realized that his job—the sole reason Bennie had placed him there—was to block the door and keep the singer from escaping. They grappled in huffing silence, Scotty's desiccated face so close to Alex's that he was inhaling the guy's breath, which smelled of beer, or the aftermath of beer. Then he refined his opinion: Jägermeister.

Bennie seized Scotty from behind, but it wasn't much of a hold—Alex made this discovery when Scotty managed to rear back and head-butt him in the solar plexus. Alex gasped and doubled over. He heard Bennie murmuring to Scotty as if trying to calm a horse.

When he could breathe again, Alex made an effort to consult with his boss. "Bennie, if he doesn't want to—"

Scotty swung at Alex's face, but Alex darted aside and the musician's fist smashed the flimsy door. There was a tannic smell of blood.

Alex tried again: "Bennie, this seems kind of—"

Scotty wrenched free of Bennie and kneed Alex in the balls, which made him crumple to the floor in fetal agony. Scotty kicked him aside and threw open the door.

"Hello," came a voice from outside. A high, clear voice, distantly familiar. "I'm Lulu."

Through his roiling pain, Alex managed to turn his head and look at what was happening outside the trailer. Scotty was still in the doorway, looking down. The slanted winter sun ignited Lulu's hair, making a nimbus around her face. She was blocking Scotty's path, one arm on each of the flimsy metal railings. Scotty could easily have knocked her over, but he didn't. And in hesitating, looking down for an extra second at this lovely girl blocking his way, Scotty lost.

"Can I walk with you?" Lulu asked.

Bennie had scrambled to retrieve the guitar, which he handed to Scotty over Alex's prone form. Scotty took the instrument, held it to his chest, and inhaled a long, shaky breath. "Only if you'll take my arm, darling," he replied, and a ghost version of Scotty Hausmann flickered at Alex from the dregs that were left, sexy and rakish.

Lulu twined her arm through Scotty's, and they moved straight into the crowd: the addled geezer carrying the long, strange instrument, and the young woman who might have been his daughter. Bennie hauled Alex onto his feet, and they followed, Alex's legs watery and spastic. The oceanic sprawl of people shifted spontaneously, clearing a path to the platform where a stool and twelve enormous microphones had been positioned.

"Lulu," Alex said to Bennie, and shook his head.

"She's going to run the world," Bennie said.

Scotty climbed onto the platform and sat on the stool. Without a glance at the audience or a word of introduction, he began to play "I Am a Little Lamb," a tune whose childishness was belied by the twanging filigree of his slide guitar, its gushy metallic complexity. He followed that with "Goats Like Oats" and "A Little Tree Is Just Like Me." The amplification was fine and powerful enough to eclipse the chopper throb and deliver the sound even to the distant reaches of the crowd, where it disappeared between buildings. Alex listened in a sort of cringe, expecting a roar of rejection from these thousands he'd managed secretly to assemble, whose goodwill had already been taxed by the long wait. But it didn't happen; the pointers, who already knew these songs, clapped and screeched their approval, and the adults seemed intrigued, attuned to double meanings and hidden layers, which were easy to find. And it may be that a crowd at a particular moment of history creates the object to justify its gathering, as it did at the first Human Be-In and Monterey Pop and Woodstock. Or it may be that two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar. Whatever the reason, a swell of approval palpable as rain lifted from the center of the crowd and rolled out toward its edges, where it crashed against buildings and water wall and rolled back at Scotty with redoubled force, lifting him off his stool, onto his feet (the roadies quickly adjusting the microphones), exploding the quavering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before and unleashing something strong, charismatic, and fierce. Anyone who was there that day will tell you the concert really started when Scotty stood up. That's when he began singing the songs he'd been writing for years underground, songs no one had ever heard, or anything like them—"Eyes in My Head," "X's and O's," "Who's Watching Hardest"—ballads of paranoia and disconnection ripped from the chest of a man you knew just by looking had never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset, who was part of no one's data, a guy who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage, in a way that now registered as pure. Untouched. But of course, it's hard to know anymore who was really *at* that first Scotty Hausmann concert—more people claim it than could possibly have fit into the space, capacious and mobbed though it was. Now that Scotty has entered the realm of myth, everyone wants to own him. And maybe they should. Doesn't a myth belong to everyone?

Standing next to Bennie, who watched Scotty while frenetically working his handset, Alex felt what was happening around him as if it had already happened and he were looking back. He wished he could be with Rebecca and Cara-Ann, first dully, then acutely—with pain. His handset had no trouble locating his wife's handset, but it took many minutes of scanning that section of the crowd with his zoom to actually spot her. In the process, he panned the rapt, sometimes tearstained faces of adults, the elated, scant-toothed grins of toddlers, and young people like Lulu, who was now holding hands with a statuesque black man, both of them gazing

at Scotty Hausmann with the rhapsodic joy of a generation finally descrying someone worthy of its veneration.

At last he found Rebecca, smiling, holding Cara-Ann in her arms. She was dancing. They were too far away for Alex to reach them, and the distance felt irrevocable, a chasm that would keep him from ever again touching the delicate silk of Rebecca's eyelids, or feeling, through his daughter's ribs, the scramble of her heartbeat. Without the zoom, he couldn't even see them. In desperation, he T'd Rebecca, *pls wAt 4 me, my bUtiful wyf*, then kept his zoom trained on her face until he saw her register the vibration, pause in her dancing, and reach for it.

"It happens once in your life, if you're the luckiest man on earth," Bennie said, "an event like that."

"You've had your share," Alex said.

"I haven't," Bennie said. "No, Alex, no—that's what I'm saying! Not even close!" He was in a prolonged state of euphoria, collar loose, arms swinging. The celebration had already happened; champagne had been poured (Jägermeister for Scotty), dumplings eaten in Chinatown, a thousand calls from the press fielded and deferred, the little girls ferried home in cabs by the joyful, exultant wives ("Did you hear him?" Rebecca kept asking Alex. "Have you ever heard anything like him?" Then whispering, close to his ear, "Ask Bennie again about a job!"), closure achieved with Lulu at the introduction of her fiancé, Joe, who hailed from Kenya and was getting his Ph.D. in robotics at Columbia. Now it was well after midnight, and Bennie and Alex were walking together on the Lower East Side because Bennie wanted to walk. Alex felt weirdly depressed—and oppressed by the need to hide his depression from Bennie.

"You were fantastic, Alex," Bennie said, mussing Alex's hair. "You're a natural, I'm telling you."

A natural what? Alex almost said, but stopped himself. Instead he asked, after a pause, "Did you ever have an employee . . . named Sasha?"

Bennie stood still. The name seemed to float in the air between them, incandescent. *Sasha.* "Yes, I did," Bennie said. "She was my assistant. Did you know her?"

"I met her once, a long time ago."

"She lived right around here," Bennie said, beginning to walk again. "Sasha. I haven't thought about her in a long time."

"What was she like?"

"She was great," Bennie said. "I was crazy about her. But it turned out she had sticky fingers." He glanced at Alex. "She stole things."

"You're kidding."

Bennie shook his head. "It was kind of a sickness, I think."

A connection was trying to form in Alex's mind, but he couldn't complete it. Had he known that Sasha was a thief? Discovered it in the course of that night? "So . . . you fired her?"

"Had to," Bennie said. "After twelve years. She was like the other half of my brain. Three-quarters, really."

"You have any idea what she's doing now?"

"None. I think I'd know if she were still in the business. Although maybe not"—he laughed—"I've been pretty out of it myself."

They walked in silence for several minutes. There was a lunar quiet to the streets of the Lower East Side. Bennie seemed preoccupied by the memory of Sasha. He orchestrated a turn onto Forsyth, walked a bit, and stopped. "There," he said, gazing up at an old tenement building, its fluorescently lit vestibule visible behind scuffed Plexiglas. "That's where Sasha lived."

Alex looked up at the building, sooty against the lavender sky, and experienced a hot-cold flash of recognition, a shiver of déjà vu, as if he were returning to a place that no longer existed.

"You remember which apartment?" he asked.

"4F, I think," Bennie said. And then, after a moment, "Want to see if she's home?"

He was grinning, and the grin made him look young; they were co-conspirators, Alex thought, prowling outside a girl's apartment, he and Bennie Salazar.

"Is her last name Taylor?" Alex asked, looking at the handwritten tab beside the buzzer. He was grinning, too.

"No, but it could be a roommate."

"I'll ring," Alex said.

He leaned in to the buzzer, every electron in his body yearning up those ill-lit angular stairs he now remembered as clearly as if he'd left Sasha's apartment just this morning. He followed them in his mind until he saw himself arriving at a small, cloistered apartment—purples, greens—humid with a smell of steam heat and scented candles. A radiator hiss. Little things on the windowsills. A bathtub in the kitchen—yes, she'd had one of those! It was the only one he'd ever seen.

Bennie stood close to Alex, and they waited together, suspended in the

same precarious excitement. Alex found he was holding his breath. Would Sasha buzz them in, and would he and Bennie climb those stairs together to her door? Would Alex recognize her, and would she recognize him? And in that moment, the longing he'd felt for Sasha at last assumed a clear shape: Alex imagined walking into her apartment and finding himself still there—his young self, full of schemes and high standards, with nothing decided yet. The fantasy imbued him with careening hope. He pushed the buzzer again, and as more seconds passed, Alex felt a gradual draining loss. The whole crazy pantomime collapsed and blew away.

"She's not here," Bennie said. "I'm betting she's far away." He tipped his gaze at the sky. "I hope she found a good life," he said at last. "She deserves it."

They resumed walking. Alex felt an ache in his eyes and throat. "I don't know what happened to me," he said, shaking his head. "I honestly don't."

Bennie glanced at him, a middle-aged man with chaotic silver hair and thoughtful eyes. "You grew up, Alex," he said, "just like the rest of us."

Alex closed his eyes and listened: a storefront gate sliding down. A dog barking hoarsely. The lowing of trucks over bridges. The velvety night in his ears. And the hum, always that hum, which maybe wasn't an echo after all, but the sound of time passing.

th blu nyt
th stRs u cant c
th hum tht nevr gOs awy

A sound of clicking heels on the pavement punctured the quiet. Alex snapped open his eyes, and he and Bennie both turned—whirled, really, peering for Sasha in the ashy dark. But it was another girl, young and new to the city, fiddling with her keys.