

ACT ONE

The Colony

I

THE HOUSE ON the Hill was in a tizzy.

Workmen's trucks streamed up the long gravel driveway. Two sets of plumbers from both sides of the river had been summoned to dewinterize the five bungalows behind the main house, and they did not care for one another. A broken set of windows in one bungalow had to be replaced posthaste, and a family of field mice had chewed through the electrical cable powering another. The handyman, who did not live on the property, was so overwhelmed by the state of affairs, he retreated to the extensive covered porch to eat a cheese sandwich in long deliberative bites. The mistress of the house, Masha, had lowered the shades in her first-floor office to escape the cacophony of modern tools and loud country cursing. At times, she would peek out to note the surfaces that would have to be wiped down after the workmen left. Natasha (who liked to go by Nat), her eight-year-old daughter, was upstairs, illuminated by a screen in the darkness of her room, in a lonely public world of her own.

The only happy member of the household was Alexander Borisovich Senderovsky, known as Sasha to his friends. "Happy," we should say, with an asterisk. He was agitated as well as excited. A windstorm had brought down the heavy branches of two dead trees flanking the driveway, scattering the vast front lawn with their dead white rot. Senderovsky liked to expound at length upon the "entropic" nature of his estate, the way all manner of growth was allowed to go its own way, sumacs elbowing out more well-heeled plants, ivy poisoning the perimeter, groundhogs bringing destruction upon the gardens. But the scattering of dead tree limbs made the House on the Hill look

apocalyptic, the very thing Senderovsky's guests were coming up to escape. The handyman claimed a bad back and was not handy enough to remove all the tree limbs on his own, and the so-called tree guy had gone missing. Senderovsky, in his athletic pants and wildly colored dressing gown, had tried to move one of these prehistoric-looking branches himself, but the very first heave made him fear a hernia.

"Ah, the hell with it," he said, and got into his car. A word about the car. Well, not so much about the car, as the way in which it was driven. Senderovsky had only learned to drive three years ago, at the milestone age of forty-five, and only within the limits of a country setting. The highway on the other side of the river unsettled him. He was a fiercely awful driver. The half-empty local roads inspired him to "gun" the engine of his sturdy but inflexible Swedish automobile, and he saw the yellow stripes bisecting the roads as suggestions meant for "less experienced drivers," whoever that might be. Because he did not believe in road marks or certain aspects of relativity, the concept of a blind curve continued to elude him. (His wife no longer allowed him to drive with their child onboard.) What was worse, he had somewhere picked up the phrase "tooling around."

And now Senderovsky raced to his errands, mindful only of the speed traps, set with boring predictability on the frayed edges of towns or the school zones, where the fines could be doubled. First, he visited his butchers, two former catalog models from the city, now a husband and wife, who plied their trade out of a barn so red it verged on the patriotic. The two magnificent twenty-five-year-olds, all teeth and coveralls, presented him with a wrapped parcel of sweet and Italian sausages, glistening hamburger patties, and his secret weapon: lamb steaks that clung to the bone, so fresh they could only have been rivaled by a restaurant Senderovsky admired in Rome's abattoir district. The very sight of meat for tomorrow's cookout inspired in him a joy that in a younger man could be called love. Not because of the meat itself, but because of the conversations that would flow around it as it was marinated, grilled, and served, despite the growing restrictions on such closeness. By noon tomorrow, his best friends, the ones who had been so hard to bring together during

previous summers, would finally unite, brought together by the kernels of a growing tragedy to be sure, but brought together nonetheless, in his favorite place on earth, the House on the Hill.

Of course, someone else was coming, too. Someone who was not a friend. Someone who made Senderovsky, already a drinker, drink more.

With that in mind, he sped to the liquor store in the richest village in the district, which occupied the premises of a former church. He bought two cases of Austrian Riesling at the south transept, another of rosé at the north, along with a fourth case of Beaujolais, wildly out of season, but a nostalgic wine for him and his high-school friends, Vinod and Karen. Ed, as always, would be the hardest to accommodate. Deep in the sacristy, Senderovsky picked out an eighteen-year-old bottle of something beyond his means, two bottles each of cognac and rye, and, to show his frivolous side, schnapps and a strange single malt from the Tyrol. The proprietor, a shaggy Anglo with a rosacea nose peeking out from his loosely worn mask, looked very pleased as he rang up the many purchases, his fingers clad in black disposable gloves.

“Just got a call from the state,” he said to Senderovsky. “They might shut me down any day now as nonessential.” Senderovsky sighed and bought an extra case of the Riesling and two bottles of an artisanal gin he had never heard of. He could picture Ed pursing his lips around a glass and pronouncing it “drinkable.” When the final bill, adding up to just over four digits, meandered out of the machine in many long spurts, Senderovsky’s hand could barely slalom through his signature. A special occasion, he consoled himself.

With his trunk now filled with bottles as well as meats, he gunned his car toward yet another village, this one fifteen miles north, to do some more marketing, after which he was due to drop off the meat and pick up Ed from the train station. At the exit for the bridge crossing the river, he ran into a line of cars. Nothing irritated Senderovsky more than the local version of a traffic jam. He brought a city impatience to the rural life. Around here it was considered impolite to honk, but Senderovsky honked. He rolled down his window, thrust out his long bony face, and honked some more with the palm of his

hand, the way he had seen men do in films. The car in front of him was not moving. It sat low to the ground, a rusted wheelbarrow jammed into its trunk, a national flag fluttering from the driver's window, and a partly peeled sticker on the bumper that read I STAND BY MY PRES . . . Senderovsky realized that at this pace there was no way he could go to the store and drop off the meat before Ed's train arrived. Ignoring the very clear markings on the road warning against just such a maneuver, he whipsawed his car around, and within minutes was charging up his long driveway, once again cursing the fallen tree branches that ruined the approach to the House on the Hill. As he noisily threw the meat into the industrial-sized freezer in the vast white kitchen (the house had once belonged to a chef), he dialed the boy from across the river who came round to do the lawn mowing, begging him to get rid of the branches. But the boy had other things to do. "What things?" Senderovsky challenged, threatening to pay double. Out on the covered porch he confronted the handyman who was listening to old music on a handsome red radio, but all he got was "The missus told me I wasn't to move anything heavy on account of the back."

Senderovsky's own missus now stepped onto the porch in her kافتan, arms akimbo, her fingers pressed into the softness of her abdomen. "I can't work with all this noise," Masha said in Russian to her husband, mindful of the handyman. "It's a workday for me. My patients can barely hear me and they're agitated as it is."

"What noise?"

"There's drilling by the bungalows, and you're throwing meat in the freezer and yelling at the lawn boy."

"Darling," Senderovsky answered, using an inflated diminutive of the term: *dorogushka*. He had known his wife since they were children. Russian was a language built around the exhalation of warmth and pain, but lately Senderovsky had found his declarations of love for his wife stilted, as if he were reading them from a play. "The workers will knock off at three, as they always do," he said. "And I've only to pick up Ed and get the groceries."

The handyman stared at them for the aliens they were. When he had started working for them three years ago, they were of approxi-

mate size, two smallish figures, college professors most likely (a tiny but very active college was within striking range of Senderovsky's car), annoying in their requests and frugal in their outlays, but speaking with one slightly accented city voice. Now the woman had become larger, more local-looking around the waist and arms, while the man had done the opposite, had shrunk and emaciated himself and lost most of his hair, his only salient points a sharp nose and the brick of a forehead, to the point that the handyman suspected he was ill. In another reversal, the husband seemed happier today, despite the seeping sibilants of the language they spoke, while she had taken on his former briskness. Whatever this weekend would bring, the handyman thought, it would not be good. Also, he had heard that the Senderovskys' appliance repairman from across the river had not been paid in months even as the refrigerator in the main house continued to break down in interesting new ways.

The conversation continued, rising in pitch, until the woman turned to the handyman and said, "Would you mind trimming the hedges by the pool? Everyone else is busy."

"That type of work I'm not really cut out for," the handyman said. Despite the cold March weather, he was wearing denim shorts of an antiquated sky blue, and one of his legs was covered in iconography neither of the Senderovskys could understand, eagles, snakes, and cryptic symbols, which they hoped was not a sign of a violent affiliation. The first year they had bought the House on the Hill, after they had set out their nondenominational New Year's tree, the handyman had said to the husband, "I didn't figure you for Christmas-tree people." He had smiled as he said it, but they both had lain awake that night, wondering what he meant.

"The trimmers are in the garage," the wife said to the handyman. "We would really appreciate it." That was another change the handyman had noticed over the last few years: while the husband dithered, the wife now spoke with finality, a rubber band snapped against the fingers.

Senderovsky kissed his wife awkwardly on the brow and ran for his car. He tore down the driveway at forty miles an hour, rearranging the gravel behind him into a series of bald spots, and swung onto the

road without checking for oncoming vehicles. As he picked up still more speed by the neighboring sheep farm, there was a rattling in the back, and he realized he had forgotten to clear out the cartons of alcohol. He wondered what would happen if he were to transfer a bottle of whiskey to the front of the car. On previous visits, he and Ed would swig while driving home, impatient to resume their friendship. Today, made happy by the arrival of his friends, and anxious by the arrival of his nemesis, Senderovsky wanted to flood his mouth with liquor, to stupefy himself in the manner of his ancestors.

The lot in front of the station was filled with European cars awaiting passengers. Senderovsky waved to a professor of Calabrese studies at the local college and to the owner of a surprisingly thriving café and bookstore anchoring the fashionable neighborhood of the little city right across the river. Seeing these friendly faces cheered Senderovsky. He was a respected figure in these parts. “You have a lovely family and a lovely home,” his Los Angeles agent had told him during a visit several years ago, after another television project had collapsed.

The train was twenty minutes late, but finally its ancient gray form drew flush with the similarly gray line of the river. City folk clambered up the stairs from the platform to the station, breathless with age. Senderovsky spotted his first guest, relatively young and limber. Ed Kim toted a leather Gladstone bag, wore aviator sunglasses, and kept his hair dark. From the moment he had met him when they were both in their twenties, Ed reminded Senderovsky of a film he had seen about China’s last emperor, specifically the dissolute stage when the hero wore a tuxedo and was the puppet ruler of Manchuria.

Senderovsky jumped out of the car. He was still wearing his dressing gown, a gift Ed had bought him at a Hong Kong shop called The Armoury. The two men regarded each other by the curb, Senderovsky playing the dog to Ed’s cat. Usually, he would surround his friend in a skinny-armed embrace while Ed tapped his back with one hand as if burping him. “Ah, what are we supposed to do now?” Senderovsky cried.

“I’m over this elbow-bump business,” Ed said. “Let me get a look at you.” He lowered his sunglasses, the way some uncles do when

they greet their young nieces. The creases around his eyes looked like they had been there since birth, while his expression was both distant and amused. Senderovsky's friend Karen, who was slightly related to Ed through a dissipated ancestor back in Seoul, also sometimes wore that expression, but she had only been able to pull it off after her recent success.

Ed managed to light a cigarette with one hand while simultaneously popping open the trunk and depositing his vintage bag. "So Masha told me to tell everyone," Senderovsky said, "no smoking in the car. In fact, no smoking on the property either. She says it can make the virus worse if you get it.

"But," he added, "I left an ashtray in your bungalow under the sink."

"Just let me get three drags in," Ed said. Sasha watched as he drew three cartoonish inhales and expelled the smoke into the slate air. As a younger man, Sasha had dreamed of becoming Ed. He still fantasized about spending a year traveling around the world with him just as soon as his daughter graduated from the very expensive city school for sensitive and complicated children.

"Also," Senderovsky continued, "she told me that no one should sit in the front seat. For distancing purposes."

"Oh, the hell with that," Ed said, opening the front passenger door. "People are really going overboard with this thing. I'll crouch down when we get to the house." The car filled with the aroma of fresh tobacco, which made Senderovsky wistful for a smoke. Ed placed a hand on the glove compartment, bracing himself for the landowner's torque. "What happened there?" He pointed at the dangling side mirror.

"The garage bays are too narrow," Senderovsky said. Seconds had passed, but the train station was already far behind them, and they were racing, swerving, past the skeleton of what, in three months' time, would become a farm stand. "I ought to have them widened."

"What's that Russian saying about incompetent people trying to pass the blame?"

Senderovsky laughed. "'A bad dancer is bothered by his balls.'"

“Mmmm.”

“Would you mind if we get some groceries? All I have is the meat and booze.”

“I’m in no hurry,” Ed said, and Senderovsky immediately thought of a fitting epitaph for his friend: *HERE LIES EDWARD SUNGJOON KIM, HE WAS IN NO HURRY*. He accelerated the car farther north along a tight state road that allowed for a view of the purple mountains across the river, each given a sophomoric American name. Peekamoose was his daughter’s favorite. Meanwhile, as Senderovsky pattered on about the weather, the political news, speculation about the virus, the merits of sweet sausage versus hot Italian, Ed espied a great frontal system of boredom on the horizon, of endless upper-middle-class chatter, badly made country Negronis, cigarettes snuck. What could he do? His friend had begged him to come up, and the now-muted city would be more depressing still.

“So who else is coming?” Ed asked. “Besides the Exalted One.” He was referring to the famous actor who was coming up for a few days to work on a screenplay with Senderovsky, the source of his friend’s anxiety. “Karen, you said.”

“Vinod, too.”

“Haven’t seen him in ages. Is he still in love with Karen?”

“He lost a lung to cancer a few years ago. Then he lost his job at City College.”

“That’s a lot of loss.”

“Masha wanted him to come up, because his immune system might be compromised.”

“I wish I was tragic enough for your wife to like me.”

“Keep working on it.”

“Who else?”

“An old student of mine. She published an essay collection last year. *The Grand Book of Self-Compromise and Surrender*. It made a splash.”

“Well, at least she’ll be young. Maybe I’ll learn a thing or two. How’s your kid, by the way?”

“Flourishing,” Senderovsky said.

They skidded into a town that wasn't. The selection at Rudolph's Market, its sole business, contained goods that neither Ed (born Seoul, 1975) nor his host (Leningrad, 1972) had enjoyed in their early non-American years, candy that tasted like violets, bread that was so enriched you could use it for insulation. Alongside these outrageously marked-up nostalgic items were international ones even dearer, which Ed carelessly piled into a basket. There were fresh whole sardines that could be grilled before the meats, dirigible-shaped Greek olives from ancient islands, cheeses so filled with aromatic herbs they inspired (on Senderovsky's part) memories that had never happened, ingredients for a simple *vitello tonnato* that somehow came to over eighty dollars, excluding the veal. "I think we have enough," Senderovsky said with alarm. "I don't want anything to spoil."

They were standing in a long line of second-home owners. When the shocking amount due appeared on a touch screen, they both looked away, until the old woman behind the counter coughed, informatively, into her gloved fist. Senderovsky sighed and reached for his card.

Soon, they were raising gravel up the long driveway. It was only 2:00 P.M., but the workers had already left, along with their powerful trucks stenciled with old local names. "I'm sorry about all these dead branches," Senderovsky said. "I've been trying to get them cleaned up."

"What branches?" Ed was looking absently at his new home, at the bungalows rising up behind the main house like a half circle of orbiting moons. The sky was the color of an old-fashioned projector screen pulled down to the edges of the distant hills, splotted here and there by the hand of an inky boy.

Meanwhile, in her office, Masha had lifted up a heavy beaded curtain. She saw Ed clambering out of her husband's car with the languor that came so easily for him. Naturally, he had not sat in the back, like she had asked. She made a snort she instantly recognized as her grandmother's, a labor camp survivor. *Well, there it is*, her grandmother would say. The first of the children was here. More children for Masha to take care of, in addition to the one watching Asian boy-

band videos upstairs, mouth open, eyes bleary, pacified. Soon the property would be filled with them, grown children without children. All of her friends were married, unlike her husband's (and none was crazy enough to visit someone else's house at a time like this). Masha shut off her screen, thought about changing out of her kaftan for Ed, but then went into the driveway exactly as she was.

Ed was walking with the leather Gladstone creaking behind him. Masha had partly grown up in New Jersey and had seen powerful men carry golf bags in a similar way. "How was the train up?" she shouted, her tone a little too needy, she thought.

"Charming," Ed said. "I got a seat with river views." He knew he had to get some preliminaries out of the way: "Thank you so much for hosting me during this time. It's much appreciated." He forced himself to take an exaggerated breath of damp air. "Mmm," he said. "Just what the surgeon general ordered. You both look wonderful. Sasha's really lost some weight."

The weight comment, he quickly realized, could be misinterpreted by Masha, who was beautiful but now reminded him of a noblewoman's portrait he had seen last year at the Tretyakov Gallery. The kaftan certainly didn't help. The two men walked silently up the cedar steps of the vast covered porch, which was connected to the main house and overlooked the bungalows, the centerpiece of the property and also its jewel, a screened-in world within a world.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to be a little doctorly," Masha said, "if that's even a word."

"Not at all," Ed said. Not at all he didn't mind, or "doctorly" was not at all a word? Masha had to think about it, which maybe was the point.

"I've made some rules," she said. "Since you've taken the train up, maybe you could change into fresh clothes before you sit down anywhere. But before that I'd like to wipe down some of the surfaces, which the workers touched in your bungalow. There's a lot we still don't know about this virus."

"Safety first."

She did not like his tone. Senderovsky stood beside them in a hunched-over position. He had had to serve as diplomat between

two feuding parents for many decades. “Also in public areas like the porch and the dining room,” Masha continued, “I’m going to try to space everyone out and also to give everyone a designated seat. I’m sorry if I sound like a killjoy.”

“There’s no right or wrong here,” Ed said. “We all have to be ourselves during this crisis.”

Actually, there was a right and a wrong here. Ed reminded her of her husband’s parents. Talking with them was like dealing with a smiling adversary who kept a handful of poisoned toothpicks in his pocket. Every time you let your guard down, there would be a sharp prick at your haunches.

“Here’s another question I have to ask. And this is really a compliment, because you’re always going somewhere. Can you tell me where you’ve traveled since, let’s say, December of last year?”

“Since December? Hmmm.” Ed looked up at the stucco-clad main house, a neutral gray like the sky. People of a certain class, immigrants in particular, did not like to rock the boat. A second-floor landing and an adjoining window were yellow-lit at an odd angle, like a Mondrian painting—the top quadrant being the daughter’s room, most likely. Ed had forgotten her name.

“Well, I went to Addis for the jazz thing,” he said. “Then I went to AD to visit Jimmy who’s teaching there.” Ed drew a line in the air from (presumably) Addis Ababa to (presumably) Abu Dhabi. “I went back to Seoul for Christmas. No, wait.” The line across the Arabian Sea stopped abruptly, and Ed’s finger circled, dumping fuel. “I saw Suketu in Bombay, just for the weekend, then I continued on to Seoul.” Sasha followed the line in the air with great interest, imagining it were he and not Ed doing the travel, a business-class whiskey in hand. A long time ago, after his childhood relationship with Masha had ended, but before his adult relationship with her would begin, he had worked as a contributing editor to a travel magazine, humping around both hemispheres with nothing but a notepad and some vocabulary. That interval contained some of the best years of his life, the expense accounts, the sweat of tropical cities, the drunken camaraderie of the Eds of the world.

“When did you leave Seoul?” Masha was asking.

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at. I left right after Christmas, before things got bad there. And from there”—Ed’s index finger was ready for a significant jump—“I went to the Big Island.”

“In honor of our bungalow!” Sasha said, brightly. The bungalow reserved for Ed mimicked the one he and Masha had enjoyed during their honeymoon on Hawaii’s Big Island, and it came with a feature no other house did—an outdoor shower, its walls rendered in sea-shells.

“Yes,” Ed said. “My friend Wei got a bungalow at the Mauna Kea. Call me a bungalow hopper.”

“Wei Li?” Senderovsky asked.

“Wei Ko. He’s in biotech. I guess this is his moment to shine.”

“And then you came back to the city,” Masha said.

“Well, actually, no. My brother bought a vineyard in Hungary.” Senderovsky remembered the Austrian Riesling and assorted alcohol still rattling around in his trunk, and prayed nothing had broken during his many trips, especially the eighteen-year-old bottle he had bought for Ed and the Actor to share. “I was over by Lake Balaton,” Ed continued. “Did your families ever go there back in the day? Soviet vacations? The wine was plonk, but I ate a great veal liver soaked in butter and paprika, would love to know how they made it. And then London.”

“Any reason for London?” Masha asked. Sasha thought that she sounded like a Heathrow immigration officer inspecting a visitor from a developing country.

“No, it was just—London,” Ed said.

“Last question, I promise. Any trips to China or Northern Italy?”

“Nope,” Ed said. He set down his Gladstone bag with a thud of frustration. “Wait, actually, I transferred through Linate once.”

“That’s Milan,” Sasha said.

Both men noted the way Masha looked at her husband just then. But it wasn’t her husband’s suggestion that she wasn’t worldly that irked her. They force me to be someone I’m not, Masha thought. They mistake my caring for authoritarianism, and then I have no choice but to become Stalin in an apron. But what option do I have if I’m to keep these cretins from getting sick?

"It was a very brief transfer," Ed said of his time in Northern Italy. "I'm sure I don't have it." When Ed Kim became nervous during conversation, he cupped his right hand behind his right ear, as if trying to make a conch shell out of it. It was a nervous tic everyone noticed, and he himself was well aware of, but he couldn't stop his ear cupping during times of social anxiety.

"I'm sure you don't," Masha said. "I really hate to go through all this. It's because of Natasha." Right, that was the daughter's name. Sasha, Masha, Natasha. They didn't even try, these Russians. "You can't be too careful," she added. "Any special requests for dinner?"

"Don't even think about it," Ed said. "I'm going to cook tonight. You just rest up. I've heard parents have it extra hard these days. And I'm sure Sasha's no help at all."

"We bought some amazing things," Senderovsky said. "We know how much you love fresh sardines." Masha smiled. Even if it wasn't true that they had thought of her, the lie was nice. She would settle for the lie. Ed thought he had caught a glimpse of her youth when she smiled. The new plushness of her chin reminded him of a Greek girl he had fallen in love with, almost a decade ago to the day, one of the last times he had ever loved somebody, had allowed forgotten parts of himself, the underside of his ankles, his eyelashes, to tingle for no reason. Senderovsky placed both hands in the fertile valley between his breasts and his throat, happy that his friend and his wife were getting along. There was complete stillness now, except for the sound of an overexcited tree frog and the handyman loudly clipping the hedges by the covered pool, as if protesting his lot.

A pebbled path ran between the bungalows, in a way that Senderovsky had hoped would create the feel of a tidy European village, the kind that would have never welcomed his ancestors. The bungalows formed a crescent around the main house, some overlooking a classical meadow, others a minor forest overrun by noisy animals. They were cozy in winter, as all small dwellings should be, and utilitarian in summer, but they lacked the visual flair of smoking chimneys or sliding porch doors. The luxuries were supposed to be communal: the fine food and even-finer conversation. There had been a dearth of laughter and clever ideas in Senderovsky's early

homelife, and even though nowadays he went out to restaurants and the occasional literary party in the city, nothing pleased him more than being the ringleader of his country menagerie. Not to mention the stealth surprise of walking across acres of private Senderovsky land on a continent that had signed his adoption papers.

Alone, Ed unpacked his bag, laptop (he remembered now that there was no reception in the bungalow), chargers, fresh packets of balled-up Korean underwear presented by his mother's maid, polo shirts, a linen jacket (would he really have to stay into summer?), two ties, and a pocket square. He sat down on the soft, comfortable, Art Deco-adjacent bed and had what must have been a panic attack, his breaths coming in quick short bursts as if he was sucking air out of a balloon at gunpoint.

The sole window disclosed an ever-deepening gray, an artificial intelligence's idea of days passing on earth. He was so close yet so far from the city's fast-moving harbor skies. Were there ever contrails above the peaked cedar roof? Planes following the river down to the airports? He heard a purser's strict, pinched voice from what already seemed like another era: *Meine Damen und Herren, wir begeben uns jetzt auf den Abstieg nach Berlin-Tegel*. How many of his similarly situated friends around the world were looking out of a double-insulated window or up at a pitched cedar ceiling trying to calm themselves with similar incantations?

Above the headboard there was a lush photograph of lava from the Big Island's Kilauea volcano boiling into the Pacific. Ed thought the composition was obvious but beautiful, interplanetary even, yet he scrambled up on the bed and moved the frame to make it about twenty degrees off kilter. He messed up the bed's careful sheets as if two lovers had just enjoyed a tussle on it. He spotted two carved wooden statues of pineapples on the modernist desk (noting that significant pineapple production had only ever taken place on Maui and Oahu, never on the Big Island) and knocked over one of them, adding some asymmetry to the deathly hospital order around him.

What would his mother say from her immovable Gangnam cocoon, her throat tingling with hot barley tea? Advice she would never follow herself. Be strong for your friends.

A woman—Masha, it would have to be—was screaming from the direction of the long covered porch. It sounded to Ed like “Gnat! Gnat! Gnat!” She was living in the country and afraid of a gnat? Ed leaned back on the bed, liberated a Gauloise from a crumpled pack, and stared down the blinking light of the smoke detector above him. Be strong for his friends? Velocity was his friend. Disappearing landscapes were his friends. He remembered that Sasha had left an ashtray for him under the bathroom sink. The rebellious cigarette quickly lightened Ed’s mood. There was still some time before dinner, wasn’t there? He had forgotten his earplugs but managed to fall asleep anyway.

2

KAREN CHO BOWED her rental car into the many dips and blind turns of the familiar country road, her driving skills only marginally more restrained than Senderovsky's. She had tuned in a satellite channel blasting songs from her youth and was trying to take it seriously, the way Ed always did, giving even the stupidest song his karaoke best. And this was not a stupid song.

Christine, the strawberry girl.

Christine, banana split lady.

She had missed driving since moving back from the West Coast, but, unlike Senderovsky, she could never identify the frisson it gave her, the sense of being slightly more American in the very act of piloting a many-ton behemoth down a road with excess speed, stuffing a hatchback with a family-sized pack of absorbent towels, clicking on the hypnotic metronome of a turning signal. Driving matched her new sense of power, which, if she were honest with herself, she still did not fully understand. "What does it feel like?" Senderovsky kept asking her after she had sold her so-called company, really just an idea, a software developer (her friend and former bandmate) and two intellectual property lawyers on retainer. She told him that she could now lash out at a white man in an expensive hoodie, safe in the knowledge that she would still get to keep her money when she was done yelling at him.

Now she's in purple, now she's the turtle.

Disintegrating.

Karen slammed on the brakes. “Whoa,” she said. Since the divorce, she had started speaking to herself. A perfectly rolling green hill conjured up a dinosaur’s back. The back was covered with woolly little ticks. She remembered now that a part of Sasha’s property abutted a sheep farm, and so she pulled over and got out of the humming, beeping car. The sheep were lined up in rows as if practicing the very distancing prescribed for their owners. They had recently been sheared and now carried themselves like gangly teenagers. Some had their mouths stuffed with grass, but most were watching something beyond the fence separating their farm from Senderovsky Land. Karen wanted to take out her phone to snap a picture, but stopped herself. Recently, she had sworn to stop uploading photographs to the very social media that had made her rich, to enjoy moments instead of imprisoning them.

Karen walked toward the fence, along mounds of recently cut grass. On the other side of the road, next to an imposing new house, she spotted horses wearing sweaters. Horses in sweaters, what a life. It seemed almost impossible that the owners of the broken houses she had seen up the road, “shitbox Federals,” as Ed had once described them in his Ed way, could breathe in the same rich country air as Sasha and some of his neighbors. She was surprised the nation’s very atmosphere hadn’t yet been tagged by an algorithm and parceled out according to its content. Some of her confederates back in the Valley were probably working on it. She stole a great big lungful of a budding forsythia, and then another, a city girl suddenly grateful. Easter would be coming soon, but her mother was still dead.

A sheepdog was pacing up and down the perimeter, yapping her head off about something, the sheep arrayed behind her watching the commotion patiently, assured by their leader’s presence. Karen could make out a lone, tiny figure moving about in the incumbent dusk on the Senderovsky side of the fence and began to walk toward it, entranced. Why had she come here? The official version was to see her friends, whom she felt she had neglected since her success. Though the last time she had spoken to Vinod it was hard to contain her sadness. And her anger. Even after he had lost part of his lung to cancer, he was still working in his uncle’s greasy kitchen. It was as if he was

taunting her with how his life had turned out. She came close to actually offering him money or a make-work job—in other words, to breaking his heart. Well, better his heart than his remaining lung. His heart had proved quite resilient over the years despite everything Karen had done to it. So, again, why had she come here?

The version she told herself, the unofficial one, was that she wanted to see the Actor. It was true that in her new life she got to see a lot of famous people, but she had loved him since that first movie back in the late nineties, the one where he danced naked in that stupid hat, instantly her generation's darling. The idea of mixing in the Actor with the desperate charm of Sasha's bungalow colony had moved her to rent a car and leave the canceled city. Even during the drive up on the empty scenic highway, she had found herself placing one hand on the inside of her thigh, her breath unexpectedly warm, her upper lip scented like spring.

So there was an official reason for her visit and the unofficial one. But, former adjunct professor and current kitchen boy Vinod would ask, which one was true?

Now the prancing figure became clear: It was a boy, and he seemed to be—what? Her eyesight was getting worse now, especially in the dark. She was a year older than both Sasha and Vinod, which meant her fifties would be upon her in a matter of months not years. But no, as clear as a fading country day, the boy was prancing, dancing, clapping his hands, punching the air martial-arts style, while singing in a sweet girlish voice as the dog yapped her unheeded warnings and her charges watched raptly, too startled to *baa*.

When she heard the lyrics, Karen laughed out loud, much in the same way she had when her now ex-husband Leon had served her with divorce papers or when her lawyer presented her with an initial offer for her company. Her childhood had passed with almost no surprises, an endlessly swinging pendulum of parental insults and popular culture, being yelled at downstairs, self-soothing upstairs. (At least, her parents would have pointed out, there had *been* stairs, unlike her poorer relations in their cramped Elmhurst apartments.) The words the boy was singing were unmistakably in her mother's tongue, followed by the English chorus: *I'm so sick of this fake-ah love*,

fake-ah love, fake-ah love. It was a boy-band pop hit from maybe two summers ago. She remembered hearing it on repeat while shopping for her deadbeat relatives at Lotte World, back when she had gone to Seoul to receive a week's worth of adulating press coverage for being a prized sample of her people, a daughter of Daehan Minguk made good.

The proto-Korean boy was wearing a cute white V-neck cardigan, tan slacks, and what looked like an adult tie that reached down to his thighs. A Korean school uniform gone off the rails. Karen was surprised but also not. Everything that happened within Senderovsky's orbit was always a little strange.

"Hi!" Karen shouted to the boy. There was no answer. Did he not speak English (beyond "fake-ah love")? "*Annyonghaseo!*" Karen shouted. The child looked up, waved, then went back to his prancing and singing. The sheepdog now registering two enemies, one of them larger than herself, began to growl, fury turning to menace, and the sheep started to bleat in response, even though some continued to chew mouthfuls of grass through their panic. And then Karen recognized something in the boy, the oval of the face, the elongated but stocky legs, the flare of the nose, this exact child who'd sat on Senderovsky's lap several years ago on the covered porch as he tried to explain—in a borderline racist way—how his daughter bore all the trademarks of the region around Harbin by the Chinese-Russian border, from whence she had been adopted.

"Natasha?" Karen said. The child kept dancing. The sheepdog and her charges now formed an angry dialogue, both with their perceived enemies and with one another, a shaken neoliberal confronting a steadfast one. "Natasha!"

"I go by Nat now," the child said, in between verses, thrusting out her chest, chastely pumping her hips, her moves too practiced to be real. Unbidden, Karen remembered the theme song to a television show improbably titled *Happy Days*, and how much it had meant to dance to it in her bedroom almost half a century ago, belly full with her mother's *ramyeon*. *Saturday, what a day, groovin' all week with you.*

"Nat, where's your mommy?" Karen asked. "And daddy?" she added.

The child waved in the direction of the House on the Hill. “I like your new bob,” Karen said. No answer. “Let’s go home and get something to eat. I just drove up from the city and I’m starving.”

“No, thanks.” The child sounded out of breath, but spoke firmly. She might have been going for hours.

“Your parents might be worried,” Karen said. She took a step and grabbed one little hand. “I insist,” she said. The child looked up, mouth pursed in anger. “Hey, I’m your aunt Karen,” she said. “We played with my phone on the porch last time I was here. You remember me?”

“We’re related?” It was such an adult question. But Karen could see where it came from.

“Sure,” she said. “In a sense.”

“My daddy said Uncle Ed was coming, but he doesn’t like to play with children.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“But I don’t remember you at all.”

“Let me drive you up in my car.”

“Mommy said I should never get into a stranger’s car.”

“Mommy’s supersmart about that. But I’m not a stranger.”

“That’s what a stranger would say.” The logic on her.

“True. But I really think they might be worried about you. It’s going to be dark any second.”

“Okay, but I have to say goodbye to the sheep and the sheepdog.”

“Cool. I’d like to see that.”

The child went up to the fence separating her from the barking, braying animals. “Goodbye, sheep. Goodbye, Luna,” she said. And then bowed rigidly, like a boy-band member accepting an award. The animals seemed to calm down instantly, as if they had seen this routine before. Luna, her growl now hoarse and simmering, followed them to the brightly lit car with its clever Mancunian voices on the satellite radio.

“I don’t really know how to buckle in a child,” Karen admitted to herself as much as to Nat. “Also, I realize you and I shouldn’t be too close.”

“Because of the virus,” Nat said.

“Yeah, until this is over. Which will be really soon.”

“Or not,” said the girl. Smart like her mother, Karen thought, and just as optimistic. She buckled her into the back realizing she had never smelled a child’s sweat before and that everything they said about it was true. “Thanks, Aunt Karen,” the child said politely. The last time she had seen Senderovsky he had complained at length about his daughter’s difficulties and the fifty-nine-thousand-dollar tuition at a school that not only tolerated differences but, according to its card-stock brochure, celebrated them, to the point where Karen turned on her friend and with an eye roll that was a standard part of her vocabulary said, “Gee, maybe you should send her back to China.”

She drove slowly up the long driveway, checking on her passenger in the rearview mirror. Even in the dusk, she could spot the white branches littering the front lawn like an arboreal Gettysburg. All these years and Senderovsky still couldn’t take care of himself. That thought made her grin. Same, same Sasha. Her headlights caught an unfamiliar figure running toward them from the house, screaming very distinctly, “Nat! Nat! Nat!,” and Karen’s passenger announced, “That’s my mommy.” Karen squinted. She had always held the image of Masha from the early days when they were all worried that she didn’t eat enough. Masha, in her motherly haste, almost ran head-long into the car, so that Karen had to pull over into the grass, a giant white oak branch crunching beneath a wheel.

Masha opened the back door and began to unbuckle her daughter, fingers fumbling, as she half shouted, half cried, “Where were you? Where were you? *Where were you?*”

“She was singing to the sheep,” Karen said, quietly, having learned how to deal with unhappy parents in her formative stage, though that wasn’t fair to Masha. “It was cute.” They had all exited the car now, and Masha was on her knees on the gravel, bits of it stinging her feet, holding the child by the shoulders.

“You don’t do that!” she shouted. She grabbed the long tie, one of Sasha’s, most likely, and began to unwind it with fumbling fingers.

“No!” Nat cried. “Mommy, leave it on!”

“You’ll choke yourself,” Masha said as she ripped off the tie and

shoved it into the pocket of her kaftan. The girl started crying loudly. Karen could now see Sasha descending from the house in what she refused to believe was a dressing gown. She did not understand Masha's fear. Had she really thought her daughter had run away from them? Where would she go?

"I probably should park the car," she said.

"Ah! Ah! Ah!" Senderovsky shouted. "Karen! Nat!" He looked disheveled and emaciated, and had carried himself like a fifty-year-old since he was eighteen. "You found her!" he said to Karen. "Oh, thank you. We thought she had run away. We almost woke up Ed to help with the search."

"Ed can't even find himself," Karen said. "And he's looked literally everywhere."

Senderovsky laughed. "So good to see you," he said. "If only we could hug."

Karen blew him a kiss. They looked at his wife and his daughter on the gravel, Masha whispering to her in Russian, words that only Senderovsky could understand, a calming mantra she deployed only in the most dire of circumstances: "I have a wonderful family and wonderful friends. I can do anything if I work hard and am kind to other people."

The mantra must have worked. The girl leaned over and kissed her mother several times on the brow and had her kisses returned. Senderovsky, with a creaking Russian *oy*, bent down and did the same, his dressing gown now draped in mud. "We do that to make sure we're the right prairie dogs," the girl explained to Karen.

"I'm sorry?"

"Prairie dogs have to kiss each other to make sure they're related because there's so many of them," Senderovsky said.

"May I kiss Aunt Karen then?" the child asked. "I think we're related."

Karen found herself stepping forward, expectantly, but Masha raised her hand. "Aunt Karen just came from the city, so we'll have to give her a little time," she said. And then to Karen: "Thank you so much for finding this crazy girl. I thought I was going to lose my mind."

“How old is she now?” Karen asked.

“I’m eight!” the child shouted. “Look at the birthday bracelet my mommy gave me with eight merino wool beads for each year. The beads spell out N-A-T-A-S-H-A, and an exclamation mark. Natasha! But I really go by Nat. Also ‘she’ and ‘her’ are my pronouns, though I reserve the right to change them later.”

“She’s eight going on eighty,” Senderovsky said to Karen. “Anyway, sorry for the drama of our opening act. I promise it’s going to be country peace and quiet from this point forward. Masha can help you get settled; I have to pick up Vinod from the bus station.”

“You’re not going to help calm your daughter?” Masha said, in, she realized, the wrong language. “What’s wrong with you?” she added in Russian.

“I can’t leave Vinod at the station. Not with his health. And she’s okay now. She’s had her prairie dog kiss.”

Karen drove the rest of the driveway up to the garage while Senderovsky walked alongside her like an obedient liege. The futuristic car guided itself into a spare bay with verve. Senderovsky was saddened by the tumult that had accompanied his friend’s arrival, while Karen was gladdened by her promotion to “aunt.” She knew she would soon be bathed in her friends’ many problems. Unlike her younger sister, and her mother, when she was still alive, at least these two would listen to her.

3

ONCE AGAIN SENDEROVSKY'S car attacked the innocent mailbox on a bend in the road leading to the bridge, further crumpling the naïve art on its side, an ageless Easter bunny delighted by a field of clover. Once again Senderovsky pictured a crying child—"They hit Bunny!"—and a consoling parent, "Not on purpose. It was just a bad driver." And once again his car's proximity-alert gong sounded, but only as the carnage was already underway. Senderovsky sped on. Someday, he would buy the property owner a new mailbox with a rabbit drawn by an artist from the city, something bound to appreciate in value if weatherproofed properly, but today he offered a silent apology in the form of a self-justified mumble: "So many things on my mind."

The twenty minutes of Nat's absence had been brutal, Masha's full-throated panicked voice (nothing more frightening to Senderovsky than a psychiatrist panicking)—"Natashen'ka!"—and his uncertain, unauthoritative one—"Nat?"—ringing around the property. Even though neither of them had been assigned to guard Nat, who, Senderovsky had presumed, had still been upstairs with her videos, he knew Masha would make him stand trial for her having gone missing. "She's already dysregulated from having school moved online, and now you're bringing five people to run around and make noise and do hell knows what." "It's good for her to be social." "With her peers, not these people." "*These* people. They're my best friends." "Oh, I know. *How* I know." "They can be parental figures, too. You love Vinod." "Vinod needs rest, not to take over the fatherly duties

you've abdicated." "So you're saying she ran away because people are coming?" "She's worried about new faces. It's not like you're a stranger to generalized anxiety disorder." "If only I had conquered my social deficits as a child. I'd be doing a lot better than I am right now, that's for sure." "I remember you back at that bungalow colony when you were eight. You were pretty damn friendly. [Switching to Russian] We couldn't shut you up." "Exactly right. And this is Nat's bungalow colony." "Minus a peer group. While she's having [switching to English] identity issues." "While she's figuring out who she is." "And Ed Kim's going to help her with that journey?" "He helped me with mine." Just to be sure, this conversation never happened. But it could have, down to the very last therapeutic turn of phrase. How Senderovsky envied writers who had taken marriage as their subject.

Even worse, he had lost face in front of Karen. Since Karen's contributions to civilization had eclipsed his own, Senderovsky had felt even more in need of her approbation. Having a "*lovely family* and a lovely home," to quote his Los Angeles agent, would be proof that unlike his divorced, childless friend, he "had it all." And now Karen had seen his daughter run away, sing to sheep. (Although maybe she had taken it as proof of the child's imagination and independence. The younger Karen would have.) A few more incidents like that might segue into diagnostic talk, which would lead to still more mention of her schooling which was filled with the most perceptive teachers ever to wield chalk and where, despite their many interventions, Nat still did not have any friends.

And, while he was searching for Nat around the property, he had gotten a vague message from the Actor about being late, or maybe not coming tonight, or maybe not coming ever, which, if true, would mean there would be no progress on the script, which, in turn, would evaporate Senderovsky's half of Nat's fifty-nine-thousand-dollar tuition. Not to mention the costs of feeding his guests indefinitely and heating and cooling their bungalows. On the other hand, Senderovsky knew that once the Actor arrived, the atmosphere would change from a Visit to Sasha's Deluxe Bungalow Colony to an Evening with the Actor in Some Country Setting. He would either

struggle to make himself heard above the Actor's beautiful silence or try to provide a laugh track, which in the end would mean the same thing.

Three cars had gathered at the intersection of two major state roads. Senderovsky had forgotten the rules on which vehicle should take precedence during such an event, assumed it was his own, and stepped on the gas. Similarly, half a mile later, he drove past a yield sign, but refused to yield. On the approach to the bridge, slowing down because of a likely police car waiting ahead (his side mirror was still dangling), he slammed on the brakes and heard a great reshuffle in his trunk ending with the unmistakable symphony of shattered glass. *Devil take it.* Once again, he had forgotten to remove the cartons of alcohol. He pulled over to the side of the road to the Kiss & Ride parking lot. Senderovsky, who had never lived by a far-flung train station, could never figure out why the lot was so named—an incitement to prostitution? He opened his trunk, which immediately reeked of spilled alcohol. He sighed. Could it be the eighteen-year-old bottle he had bought to impress Ed and the Actor (who, he had forgotten, didn't really drink)? He rummaged through the cartons until he sliced his finger, mildly, on a run of broken glass. He sucked on his finger for a while. Finally, he dared to look down. The expensive bottle was safe, but two bottles of country rye had crashed into each other and bled out into the carton. Senderovsky brought the carton up to his lips, tipped it over slightly, and drank, his tongue screening out little bits of glass. Now he was in his natural state, moderately drunk in his dressing gown, his wife and child a world away. If state law or federal law or intergalactic law would allow it, he would have spent the next hour at the Kiss & Ride drinking himself into tragicomedy before hurtling his car toward his friend. He dumped the remains of the bottles into a waiting trash bin, then stood by the side of the road, watching cars swoosh mindlessly onto the bridge, their drivers bathed in the electronics of their cockpits, looking small, indistinct, unprepared for this moment in history.

The city across the river had recently become fashionable, but was still studied by urban planning graduates as a cautionary tale. Highways meant for far-larger metropolises had been built to separate its

neighborhoods by race, and like a not-especially-clever clinical mouse Senderovsky often entrapped himself in cloverleaves and roundabouts. The bus station, catering to an obscure statewide bus company, somehow ended up in the trendy, formerly Black part of town, by the thriving new café and bookstore and a score of restaurants with dim interiors and urbane prices.

Senderovsky found Vinod standing alone by the shabby building, two plastic suitcases at his feet, looking like a slightly updated version of his father the moment he had emigrated from India, too late in his life to succeed in the New World as the owner of a computer store. Masha had insisted on upgrading his fundless friend from a bus to a train ticket, believing it was safer healthwise, but Vinod had refused her aid with the same obstinate politeness he had refused Karen's.

Senderovsky braked within inches of his friend's suitcases and leaped out of his car. The men stared at each other. For a second, both were fifteen, back at their freshman orientation at the high school for bright beaten foreign youngsters. Vinod had a full head of graying hair haloing down to his shoulders, peppery whiskers commencing to a salty beard, and somewhere amid all those outgrowths were once-frantic eyes that had recently, politely, extinguished themselves.

"*Bhai*," Vinod said, the word leaving his mouth like a short, pretty explosion.

"*Bhai*," Senderovsky replied. The word meant "brother" in Hindi. During their college years and beyond, the two had lived together for a decade in an up-and-coming neighborhood just like the one where they now stood (until the neighborhood finally came, and they were asked to leave), and through all those years Vinod referred to Senderovsky either as a *bhai* or a *bhenchod*, which was a man who enjoyed relations with his sister. (Although *bhenchod* was also used in an almost ambient way to label anyone or anything unfortunate, in the same way Russians use *blyad*, or "whore," to describe the unforgiving world around them—"When will this *whorish* snowstorm end already?")

Senderovsky spread out his arms. "Can't hug," he said. "And, just to warn you, Masha's gone all epidemiological."

“She *is* a doctor,” Vinod said.

“Psychiatrist.” Senderovsky could air his grievances to Vinod with just one word, in a way he couldn’t to his more prosperous and competitive friends.

“I’ll get in the back seat,” Vinod said as Senderovsky arranged his shiny luggage amid the cartons of alcohol.

“Are you sure? You don’t have to. I’m very healthy. Though I have lost some weight.”

“This way I can pretend I’m in a cab and you’re my driver.”

They quickly made a joke out of it, jousting in the accents of their parents, or, in Vinod’s case, an accent he had never really outgrown. “Zis taim of day, I vood take Belt Parkvey,” Senderovsky spoke in his gruffest Leningrad.

“Sir, do you vish to rob me?” Vinod protested. Senderovsky had failed to notice that, unlike most of his passengers, Vinod did not brace himself against the seat in front of him as he sped off, had not offered a prayer to any god, nor made use of his grab handle as Senderovsky swerved onto the bridge barely pausing to have his toll collected. He did register a very loud yawn, the kind he had never heard before his friend was diagnosed with cancer a decade ago. Before his illness, he could stay up all night, reinforced by a carton of Marlboros and a friendliness that rivaled Senderovsky’s, but sprang from the same lonely fount.

“We’ll be home in ten minutes,” said his driver, but Vinod knew their exact point in the journey, the car suspended above the river, leaving the continent proper in the rearview. He looked behind him to catch the very last light of the day. It was like putting on a new pair of glasses. Green grass, gray sky turning deep blue around the horizon, a screen of unblemished purple mountains. If this was all a computer simulation, then it was a very good one. Someone, *something*, in some interstellar version of Bangalore, had really poured its all into this construct.

Vinod had memorized the Declaration of Independence in third grade to prove to the nativist school bullies how much he belonged here. In the last two weeks, as people started to die in earnest, as he understood the gravity of what was about to happen to him and to

others, and *when in the course of human events it became necessary for one person to dissolve*, Vinod thought he could be that person. He accepted his friend's invitation to visit the countryside as a chance at dissolution, not so much into the usual alcohol and mild drugs, but into the stories he shared with the others. And if it came to it, he had papers at the bottom of his luggage, notarized papers, which would prepare him for any eventuality.

Now, despite Senderovsky's jerky driving, he fell asleep, dreaming of his father's Buick and all the places it had tried to go. Senderovsky watched Vinod sleeping in the back seat, his face pressed deep into the tinted Swedish glass, and he could not escape the strength of his own feelings, the untinted brightness of his love. Uncharacteristically, he slowed down to let the moment take.