

I. New York (Forty Days and Forty Nights Earlier)

Prologue. The Smidge

Jonah knew the 59th Street subway station well enough that he did not have to look up from his iPhone as he made his way among its corridors and commuters to the track. He felt lucky as he came down the stairs to the platform to see a train just pulling in—he boarded without breaking his stride, took a seat by the door of the nearly empty car, went on typing. A crowd of people flooded in at the next station, but Jonah felt he'd had a long enough day that he need not give up his seat. But then an older woman—frumpy, blue-haired, with a grandmotherly sweet face and a tiny bell of a nose—ended up standing directly before him, and Jonah decided to do the right thing and he stood.

He was not on the train long, but when he got off he saw that many of those moving past him on the platform were soaking wet: hair matted to foreheads, clothes translucent and sagging. They all bore it well, though, Jonah thought—stoically marched ahead with mouths fixed, eyes straight, as though they got drenched during every evening commute. Then, as he came to the stairwell leading up to the street, he found that a group of twenty, thirty people was standing semicircled around the bottom, not continuing out. Jonah advanced a few steps. Rain cascaded down onto the concrete stairs in an unbroken sheet, making the light shining into the station pale and misty, as if they were all gathered behind a waterfall. Those in the group shrugged to one another at their predicament—tapped away on their smartphones or just stared placidly at the rain, seemingly admiring this temporary transformation of the world outside. Some, having stood there for a few moments, turned up their collars or held out their umbrellas and flung themselves up the steps with a sort of reckless bravery. Those coming into the station—umbrellas bent, hair dripping—looked puzzled at the gathering below, as though finding a crowd of people in the subway unmoving, unshoving—even by and large content to be there—made their surroundings somehow unrecognizable.

Jonah had been running late when he'd left his office, but he knew QUEST events were always well attended; his absence from tonight's cocktail party for another ten or so minutes wouldn't make much difference. He had time, in another words, to stand there and wait out the rain, too—and he found he was glad for this momentary interruption of his day. He had lived in New York for almost a decade now, and was gratified to find, once again, that it could still surprise him.

Jonah Daniel Jacobstein was thirty-two; a lawyer; ambitious, unmarried and dating; never without his iPhone. For all these reasons, his concerns tended to be immediate, tangible, billable. But every now and then such moods of appreciation would wash over him. He would glance out the window of the Q train as it crossed over the Manhattan Bridge and would take in the Chrysler Building, the Empire State Building, the whole of the skyline over the river; he would climb into a taxi on a Friday night with crisp bills from the ATM in his pocket and Sylvia (or Zoey) to meet; he would be drunk at 4:00 a.m. with a great slice of grease-dripping pizza in his hand; and he would count himself incredibly lucky—as he did now, watching the rain in the subway station—to be who he was, when he was, where he was.

But these moods never lasted long, of course, and after a moment he checked his phone again—this having become an almost autonomic response in him, on the order of blinking. He'd gotten a dozen new emails since he'd boarded the train. That afternoon, a case he had spent the better part of a year working on had come to a settlement favorable to his clients. He was pleased to see in his

inbox several congratulatory messages from colleagues—even a few from partners.

He dropped his hand back to his side and saw that a very large Hasidic Jew had appeared beside him: pink-faced, jowly, in black hat, black coat, forelocks dangling gently at his ears, his beard jet-black, wiry and unkempt. The man was only a little older than Jonah, though he was much bigger—an enormous stomach protruding directly outward from above his waist. And he stared with peculiar scrutiny at the rain, as though he could recognize some subtle meaning in its drops.

Normally, Jonah was an avid follower of the New York convention of never under any circumstances striking up a conversation on the subway with a stranger. But he was feeling cheerful—and there appeared to have been some temporary reordering of New York conventions, anyway. And, too, Jonah, whose own Judaism was characterized by deep ambivalence, had always had a certain curiosity regarding those Jews whose Judaism seemed characterized by life-consuming certainty. Recognizing this as one of his few opportunities to talk with such a member of his (ostensible, theoretical) brethren, he turned to the Hasid and said, "Don't you have a number to call when this happens?"

In response, the Hasid pulled the sides of his fleshy face into a grin—sly, knowing—exposing yellowed teeth. He said, "You think I'd be on the train if I could make the rain stop?" Jonah chuckled. "You're on your way to some business meeting, my friend?"

"No, my day's over. I'm just going to, an event . . ." He found he was reluctant to call the cocktail party a charity event, though QUEST was indisputably a charity; describing it that way, however, struck him as somehow disingenuous. But the Hasid gave him a look of being greatly impressed by his answer.

"I could see you were a man of the world. Where would we be without such people?" His voice was rich-toned, Russian-accented, and a little high-pitched, in a decidedly wry sort of way. "You have a business card, my friend?"

This request surprised Jonah, but he didn't see any harm in it—he reached into his jacket pocket and handed the Hasid one of his cards. "You're Jewish, my friend!" the Hasid said, still more impressed. He studied the card carefully, as if he was taking note of each line, each digit in each of the three phone numbers.

"Well, I was raised Jewish," Jonah answered.

"And you study Torah, my friend?" the Hasid asked, now returning the card. "Do you keep the Sabbath?"

"I feel guilty on Yom Kippur."

The Hasid's grin broadened. "And you know, of course, the story of your namesake, Jonah, son of Amittai?"

Jonah's knowledge of such things had been halfheartedly acquired in the first place, was half remembered at best. "There was a whale . . ." he ventured.

"Oh, my friend, there is much more than the whale!" The Hasid had now moved his massive frame a little closer toward Jonah, whose back was already up against the side of a MetroCard machine.

"Jonah was a man of the world, too, just like you. Going about his business, making deals. Then one day *HaShem* came to him and said, 'Jonah, go to the corrupt city of Nineveh and tell them that while they have gold, finery, vast armies, only their body is clothed, but their soul is naked.' " Here the Hasid winked; Jonah nodded uncertainly, not quite sure what to make of this. "But Jonah had other ideas," the Hasid went on. "He tried to flee from the sight of the Lord. And what do you think happened? Storms, whales, disaster.

"*HaShem* sees everything," the Hasid continued, waving a playful finger beneath Jonah's nose. "We think we can hide, but in the end there's no escaping." He inclined his thick-bottomed chin up toward the stairs, where the rain was tapering only slightly. "Look what happens when the Lord sends even a little rain. Everyone runs underground, none can tell his right hand from his left. Won't it be so much more on the Day of Judgment, when calamity rains down from afar?" Again, Jonah could only nod, not sure with how much sincerity the still-grinning Hasid was asking. "One day it's all a big party. Then the angels knock on Lot's door. What will you tell them? Remember, not everyone gets a seat on the ark. America is naked, my friend, as naked as Nineveh. Cell phones, computers, spaceships, yadda yadda yadda. The body is clothed, but the soul is naked."

Jonah believed he was learning all over again why you were supposed to avoid entering into these conversations. "Well, it's all very interesting," he said. "In any case . . ."

This social cue toward ending the encounter was unnoticed or ignored. "You can't hide on the subway from the Lord's outstretched hand," the Hasid went on, "any more than Jonah could hide on the seas. Wouldn't you rather be counted among the righteous when the arrogant are washed away?"

"I don't think the arrogant are going anywhere."

"*Im yirtse HaShem*, we will live to see their destruction!" the Hasid cried.

It was all made the more disconcerting by the persistence of the wry grin on the Hasid's face. Though the rain was still falling heavily, Jonah edged his way around the MetroCard machine toward the stairs. But the Hasid leaned his head and large stomach even closer to Jonah—his breath unpleasantly musty. "Remember, my friend, the Lord seeks out what has gone by. Nineveh, the flood, Sodom and Gomorrah. Don't you know history is full of 9/11s?"

With this, Jonah's patience, which varied in length but not in the consistency of the irritability to which it gave way, was exhausted. Implications that he was damned he could tolerate—because who could take that seriously?—but moralizing about 9/11 was a different story. He had been in the city that day: And no, he had not lost anyone close to him, had not been in any immediate danger—but he felt he had experienced enough of it that he shouldn't have to endure hearing it characterized as some sort of divine punishment. "If you really think God had anything to do with 9/11, you're as ignorant as the people who did it."

The Hasid looked deeply saddened, and shook his head gravely. "Oh, my friend, I'm afraid you've misunderstood everything. It's my fault. I didn't go to Harvard College."

"Neither did I."

"*Nu*, you think it matters to *HaShem* what you think is ignorant?"

And though the Hasid capped the question with a final and more definitive wink—as though the whole conversation were merely a shared joke between them—Jonah decided he had heard enough and walked over to the stairs and mounted them two at a time. "Your bar mitzvah won't save you, my friend!" the Hasid cried—and maybe even guffawed as he said it.

The rain continued to fall steadily, quickly began soaking Jonah's hair, the shoulders of his suit jacket. He saw a few people huddled beneath the overhang in front of a discount shoe store—he ran over and pressed himself against the windows. Jonah didn't think anyone knew what mattered to *HaShem*—or whatever you wanted to call it—but he felt he understood the Hasid's point perfectly: You drew a circle around yourself, and everyone inside the circle was righteous and everyone outside it was not. There wasn't much more to the Hasid's philosophy—such as it was—than that.

He found himself standing beside a scruffy-looking black man—lanky, in a sweat-stained Yankees cap and cargo shorts, with large headphones over his ears, smoking the fingernail-sized remnants of a joint. He was rapping along with the music he was listening to: "Everybody got they own thang—currency chasin'! Worldwide through th'hard time—worryin' faces! Shed tears bury niggas close to the heart, was a friend now a ghost in the dark," the man chanted rhythmlessly, raspily, then took a hit. Jonah knew he'd heard the song many times, though he couldn't immediately identify it. And it occurred to him how much more comfortable he was standing here beside this man than he was with the Hasid. Then Jonah remembered.

"Tupac," he said aloud.

The man with the headphones turned and looked at him, glanced up and down at his suit suspiciously—and then laughed huskily, smoke pouring from his mouth. "Tupac!" the man cried. "He ain't dead!"

"He ain't dead," Jonah agreed.

This encounter, Jonah felt, was a better answer—a better retort—than any he might have given to the Hasid. Who could ever say who was righteous, and who was not; who was saved, and who was damned? Staying open to the world and its inhabitants—living life—having fun—that was what mattered. If he had a circle, Jonah thought proudly, this was the compass with which he would draw it.

After a few minutes the storm had diminished to the stray drop here and there, and Jonah began walking the last blocks to the QUEST cocktail party. As he made his way down the damp sidewalks of Greenwich Village into SoHo, wet and wary people emerged from doorways and bars, casting mistrustful eyes skyward. At a crosswalk he had to leap—phone clutched tightly—over a massive puddle at a clogged storm drain. Then, going a few blocks farther south, he reached the venue: the unelaborately named 555 Thompson Street, a blue-tinted sign mounted behind glass on the door confirming that this was indeed the location of the 4th Annual QUEST for New York Schools Cocktail Event and Silent Auction.

As he restraightened his tie, neatened his hair by way of running his fingers through it, he tried to recall precisely what QUEST stood for; something like Quantitative Educational Skills and Tools was about right. The organization was a nonprofit started by a dazzlingly charismatic Harvard MBA named Aaron Seyler, who did quantitative analysis consulting on Wall Street. As the narrative on the QUEST website had it, Aaron had decided he wanted to do more with his life than improve annual

returns by quarter points: He wanted to make a lasting contribution to the city where he'd become a success (though having met Aaron and seen him schmooze, Jonah suspected he'd have been a success even in a city where they still used shells and beads for currency). The idea of QUEST was to apply the quantitative tools of finance to improving what were called educational outcomes: graduation rates, test scores, college matriculation, and so forth. Aaron's vision, as he was wont to explain, was to harness the energy and insight that daily went into generating billions of dollars for banks and hedge funds toward the betterment of New York City's public schools.

Which was all well and good as far as Jonah—now pushing open the door to 555 Thompson—was concerned. He had been raised in a terrifically liberal household and town—and though his politics had been moderated by exposure to the non-terrifically liberal world outside of Roxwood, Massachusetts (and lately by necessity from working for the sort of megalithic corporations he had been brought up to despise), his politics remained essentially liberal in character. He had yet to hear an argument that made him doubt you should do all you could for the underserved and underprivileged. More money for schools? That sounded good to him. But he was not much of a joiner—not really one for causes, groups, committees. His politics were manifested mainly in voting Democratic, reading some Paul Krugman, and avoiding racial/sexual invective. In fact, it was unlikely he would have attended the QUEST event at all, except Philip Orengo, a friend from law school, was on the board, and Jonah hadn't seen him in a while; and he had gotten out of work relatively early; and Sylvia was out of town and Zoey was with her (nominal) boyfriend; and, not least, there would be an open bar. All that plus successfully completing a major case had seemed to him a good reason to have a few drinks. Yet though he understood it was this combination of convenience and circumstance that had led him to buy the seventy-five-dollar ticket—as he emerged from an entry corridor into the venue proper—it still struck Jonah that his attendance proved some implicit point in his argument with the Hasid.

The space was massive, square, brick-walled, with mod-industrial stylings: exposed ducts ran along the three-story ceiling, a catwalk was suspended above all four sides of a central floor area, where people mingled and later might dance. The walls were hung with gold-red bunting and drapery, which made a nice complement to the red brickwork and the black of the catwalk (and the fact that Jonah recognized this color coordination made him realize just how much time he was spending with fashion-conscious young women, between seeing his girlfriend and his not-his-girlfriend). A bar stretched the length of one wall, and a stage toward the back was set up with a microphone flanked by placards displaying the QUEST insignia: the dollar-bill eye pyramid, with a sort of archetypal schoolhouse in its pupil. The space was nearly filled, as Jonah had guessed it would be. It was a large though not unpleasantly packed-in crowd of men and women, mostly Jonah's age or thereabouts—professionals, for the most part, dressed in the suits and skirts they'd worn to work. As Jonah made his way inward, he passed several quite attractive young women; everyone had drinks in their hands, and something in a Cuban jazz mode played as background to the great indistinguishable mix of genial or perfunctory or flirty conversation. In short—the entire scene looked like a lot of fun.

And in hypothetical continuation of the dispute with the Hasid, Jonah acknowledged to himself the frivolity of all this—and by way of riposte, thought of all the times in which life made frivolity impossible, how frivolity was a sort of collective decision by those engaged in it, how often life conspired against it: So why not drink, flirt, and make merry? There were meetings in the morning, there were breakups down the road, everyone in this room would attend their fair share of funerals. He was not really a fatalist, but his training and experience as a lawyer had taught him that you

didn't have to believe in an argument for it to be effective—and so he felt justified in starting his evening of charity by grabbing a beer.

Ten minutes later, this beer was three-quarters gone and he was strolling the path of the catwalk. The silent auction had been set up along its perimeter: Tables were arrayed with paraphernalia representing the various items up for bid—a cluster of La Mer skin-care products for the spa package; a monogrammed plate for dinner with Aaron at Minetta Tavern; a cheese basket for a private tour of the Murray's cheese cave. He was considering making a bid on an aromatherapy massage for Sylvia when he noticed Seth Davis, an acquaintance from law school, standing on the opposite side of the catwalk. Because of Philip Orengo's role in the group, Jonah often saw members of his law school class at QUEST events. Jonah had always liked Seth, though they'd never been friends, exactly. Seth had once explained his decision to get his dual JD/MBA and go into finance rather than law by saying, "If I'm going to spend my twenties working hundred-hour weeks, I'd rather get really rich than a little rich." The financial crisis had probably bent the curve of this accumulation—but Jonah had a feeling Seth was doing just fine.

"Jacobstein!" Seth called when he saw him. He was standing with a group of other men, all in suits like Jonah, all holding beers. Jonah went over and joined them. Introductions were made, hands were shaken. Seth's group was made up of his coworkers at the financial-services firm where he worked and their friends in the industry. (Finance people tended to find one another at parties, Jonah had learned from almost a year of dating Sylvia.) The jocular rowdiness of the conversation suggested that all these men were several drinks ahead of him. An argument was going on over a five-hundred-dollar bid for a Derek Jeter–signed baseball.

"You could get that ball for a hundred fifty bucks on eBay," someone was saying to the man who'd made the five-hundred-dollar bid.

"But why would I want to give a hundred fifty dollars to some fat guy in his underwear, living in his mother's basement?" the bidder replied, and the others laughed.

"You guys aren't factoring in the tax deduction," said another man—and he dramatically wrote a bid for six hundred dollars, to a chorus of "Oh!"s from the others.

"Yeah, but your deduction is based on what some GED meathead at the IRS decides the ball is worth, right, Jacobstein?" Seth asked Jonah.

"Hey, if you want my counsel, you have to pay my retainer," Jonah replied, and the others laughed again. He didn't usually engage in greedy-lawyer humor—one tended to hear a great deal of it as a lawyer—but he'd found it always played well with the financial crowd.

"Can you even afford six hundred dollars?" someone demanded of the man who'd made the most recent bid. "I saw the ring you bought for Melissa, I know you're overleveraged."

"First of all, that's a CZ," he replied, to more laughter. "Second of all, as long as no one starts buying real estate in the Las Vegas exurbs, my bonus this year will provide all the liquidity I need."

"I'm sure that's a comfort to all the people in Vegas underwater on their mortgages," one of them joked.

"Hey, if you bought a house in the Vegas exurbs in 2005, you deserve to be underwater on your

mortgage for at least another decade," Seth said.

They all laughed some more. Yes, they were assholes, Jonah thought, but they seemed to know it, which somehow made it more forgivable. Besides, he suspected there was something to the collective American superstition—enduring despite the events of recent years—that the economy couldn't function without assholes.

At this point, the group was joined by a smiling, gangly man, with flushed cheeks and a long, ovoid face, a puff of disordered blond hair. His name was Patrick Hooper—Jonah had met him through Sylvia—and he was often at events such as this. Some of the others in the group evidently knew him, too, as they exchanged (somewhat) surreptitious eye rolls when he joined them. He looked at the bid list for the baseball and then wrote in a bid of five thousand dollars. He looked up from the page, laughing delightedly.

"The funny part is I don't even like baseball," Patrick said.

"That is funny," Seth muttered.

Patrick Hooper was, by all reports, a financial genius. According to Sylvia, during the financial-products boom years he had devised a series of commodity trades for Goldman of indisputable profitability and at least theoretical legality. Patrick had earned enough from this to retire by the time he was thirty—which he had—*The Wall Street Journal* marking the occasion with the headline a wall street wunderkind takes a bow. Even now, Goldman kept him on retainer, presumably on the chance that he might interrupt a marathon session of *World of Warcraft* to concoct some new infallible profit-making financial device. What made all the wunderkind talk hard for Jonah to take seriously, though, was the fact that Patrick was among the most socially inept people he had ever met. He wasn't a bad guy, really; he just had an astonishing talent for annoyance. The massive overbid on the baseball—ruining the entire fun of it—was, sadly, typical: Patrick seemed possessed by the very simple and very dumb idea that he could invest his way out of his social awkwardness—discover some trade of assets that would return him genuine affection, or at least popularity. Hence the parties he regularly threw at his massive Tribeca loft; the invitations he sprayed wildly to just-opened restaurants and to exclusive-ish clubs; the outsize donations to next-gen charities like QUEST. And, predictably, the more lavish and transparent these efforts were, the less success they met with.

"I'm impressed you guys came out tonight," Patrick observed. "Y'know, Aaron and I had dinner a couple nights ago," he continued, not knowing, or not wanting, to disguise his pride in this achievement. "We were talking about how important it is to get people to these events who don't actually care about charity." Patrick laughed again, though, again, no one else did.

"Well, if I knew you were coming . . ." one of them said.

"It's really ironic, though," Patrick went on. "Finance is supposed to be so evil, but Goldman does more in terms of corporate citizenship than an organization like this could ever dream of. Even though I retired several years ago, I'm still active in their—"

"Anyway," Seth interrupted, making a show of turning his shoulders away from Patrick. "They're probably going to close the open bar in a few minutes." He turned to Jonah. "You want to come?"

Jonah knew he ought not glance over to see Patrick staring into Seth's shoulder with guileless hope of being invited, too. But he did; and somehow the idea of ditching Patrick struck him as counter to the entire spirit of QUEST—whatever that was supposed to be. "No, I'm gonna make a bid or something," Jonah answered, regretting it even as the words left his mouth.

Seth shrugged, almost sympathetically. "Suit yourself. . . ." And he and the others moved off toward the stairs.

"So, I didn't know you were involved with QUEST," Patrick said as they left.

On top of everything, Jonah's beer was now empty, which only seemed to confirm he'd made a mistake in remaining. "A friend of mine is on the board," he replied.

"Adrian? Jin? Kent? Abbey? Philip?"

It didn't exactly surprise Jonah that Patrick could recite the names of the entire QUEST board from memory; he'd probably been asking them to dinner for months. "Philip and I went to law school together," Jonah explained.

Patrick nodded, a pair of dips of his long head. "And Philip went to undergrad at Princeton with Aaron."

"That's how these things work," Jonah replied.

"So how are things with Sylvia?" Patrick now inquired a little too eagerly. "Things good with you guys?" And he then finished off the glass of champagne in his hand a little too gulpingly.

Of all the irritating aspects of Patrick's personality, this one was the hardest to reconcile with a belief that he was not really a bad guy: Before Jonah met Sylvia, Patrick had been not-so-subtly courting her—and had never fully stopped courting her, despite the fact that he knew she and Jonah had been dating seriously for months. Granted, Patrick not-so-subtly courted every woman in finance he met; and, in more dispassionate moments, Jonah could even identify a certain integrity in Patrick's attempts to find a romantic partner with her own career and money, rather than just dating a platinum-blond Russian whose greatest aspiration in life was to be spoiled. But even so—how friendly could you be to someone openly hoping to steal your girlfriend?

"Things are great," Jonah lied. "Things are going great."

"We should all have dinner sometime," Patrick said. "She's a rock star, she should be working with my old team at Goldman. Definitely tell her to shoot me an email."

"I definitely will," Jonah lied again. It occurred to him that maybe Patrick deserved to be ditched. "Anyway, I should go downstairs and find Philip."

"I saw you in the West Village the other day," Patrick answered—apparently well accustomed to continuing conversations his interlocutors wanted to end.

"Oh, yeah?" Jonah said, glancing down from the catwalk, searching the crowd for the shaved black pate of Philip Orengo.

"You were in Corner Bistro with some girl."

Jonah's heart immediately launched into sharp, agitated thumping—each beat seeming to clang across his mind with the words, Think of a lie, think of a lie, think of a lie. Unfortunately, this mental activity did not bring him any closer to actually thinking of a lie, and the most he could manage was, "Uh, when?" Fixing on a lie was made still more difficult by the fact that he didn't know whether Patrick attached any significance to what he'd seen: whether he was just making conversation by whatever means necessary or, more ominously, whether he understood there was a connection between the girl he'd seen Jonah with and his own prospects with Sylvia. Who could tell how clueless or calculating Patrick was outside the world of currency derivatives and whateverthefuck?

"Maybe two weeks ago?" Patrick went on, twirling his empty, fingerprint-smudged champagne glass at the stem.

"Oh, yeah, right," Jonah said, as blithely as he could manage. "I was out with some work friends."

"The girl I saw you with was cute." Jonah was tearing through his brain, trying to remember if he'd been stupid (read: drunk) enough to have done any public canoodling that night. "Is she single?"

Was Zoey Rosen single—that, at least, he could answer honestly. "Sorry, man. She has a boyfriend."

Patrick threw back his head in a show of exaggerated disappointment. Then he asked, "Who's she dating? Somebody at your firm?" And again, was he asking because he knew he had Jonah on the hook, knew he was now in a position to get him to acquiesce to any number of dinners, trips to the Hamptons, nights at the club? Or was he—ironically more benignly—just hoping to move in on Zoey now, too? This was what Jonah got for indulging his liberalism.

But he got some sense of deliverance from Patrick's next comment: "Anyway, if they ever break up, give me her number." Still more deliverance came a moment later when Aaron Seyler—six foot four, corn-husk blond, former captain of the Princeton swim team, Rhodes Scholar, MBA, and the person Jonah would have judged most likely to solve (if any one person could solve) the education crisis, or the energy crisis, or whatever crisis caught his attention—stepped to the microphone on the stage. From the catwalk, Jonah could see the ripples of awareness of Aaron's presence spread across the room, as conversations ceased and people adjusted where they stood to get a better view of the stage. Not that Jonah blamed anyone: Aaron stood before the microphone with all the self-assurance and faith in collective approval of an actor who'd just won his third Oscar of the night. But Jonah didn't begrudge Aaron his poise, his charm, his magnetism—he admired it more than he was taken in by it, but he didn't begrudge it. He had the sense that if someone had to be Aaron Seyler, Aaron Seyler was the right man for the job.

"Don't worry, this won't take long," Aaron began. "I know you all have drinks to finish, and, frankly, so do I." This joke got more laughter than it deserved, but Aaron could have been reading selections from *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and gotten a laugh. "First, I want to thank you for coming tonight. Your donations keep the lights on at QUEST, and more important than money, I want to thank you for giving what's most precious of all, your time. I also want to direct your attention to the silent auction, which will close at eight, and I want to thank the organizations and individuals who contributed items. I should point out that this year we have two Mets season tickets up for bid, in case anyone is crazy enough to want them." (Laughter.) "I am pretty sure my bid of five dollars is still

leading." (More laughter.) "So if anybody wants to buy my tickets for the first Mets game this year . . ." (Sustained laughter.)

At this point Aaron put his right hand in his pocket, moved his face a bit closer to the microphone—getting serious. "We try to have these drinks for the friends of QUEST every year. A lot of you have been with us from the beginning, back when we weren't getting grants and I was giving the spiel you probably all have memorized by now in my living room to small groups of you. We try to do this every year because it's good for the staff and the board and myself to relax and socialize with so many old friends. But we also do it because QUEST, at its heart, is still about those late-night bull sessions in Abbey or Adrian's kitchen, when all we had was an idea of how to fix New York City schools, and the faith that if we gave people a chance to do the right thing, they would.

"Now, our generation gets accused of apathy a lot. And as a member of the MTV generation old enough to have actually watched videos on MTV, I understand why. No, our generation by and large doesn't affiliate with religious institutions. We view politics with deep skepticism. We've seen the limits of what conventional charities can do. But that to me isn't apathy. That's realism. When our generation identifies a problem—and identifying problems is something I think we'd all agree our generation excels at—when we identify a problem in our government, in our society, in our schools, instinctively our first thought is not to turn to some pastor or politician or pundit. We turn to one another. We look to our friends. We go to a friend's kitchen, and we sit down, and we say to one another, How can we make renewable energy affordable? How can we drive social justice in this country? How can we fix New York City's schools and lift up New York City's students?

"Are we that arrogant? Yup. Are we that foolish? Maybe. But we're also that brave and hopeful and confident. And we are not—we are not—apathetic. Yes, we'll do it our way, yes, we'll do it a new way, our own way, but we'll do it. This is year five of QUEST. We're in dozens of schools, we'll double that number in three years, our success metrics are off the charts—whether you want to talk about attendance, exam performance—you name it, we've optimized it. And we did it with cocktail parties, we did it with white-box Chinese food, we did it by trusting each other and believing in each other and that is how we are going to keep on doing it. So please: Make a bid, buy a ticket to the gala this fall, be bold enough to bore your friends and colleagues with our story. And if we do all that, we will be the generation of New Yorkers that saves this generation of students. Have a great night, and thank you for coming." The applause from all corners of 555 Thompson was warm, sustained, heartfelt.

As Aaron's speech began, those on the catwalk had moved toward the railing to see, and in this realignment of bodies Jonah had managed to detach himself from Patrick and their deeply uncomfortable conversation. He'd spotted Philip almost directly below him, standing with other members of the QUEST board. During the speech Jonah noticed that Philip divided his attention between Aaron and the face and figure of a bare-shouldered brunette in a green dress, directly at his two o'clock. As Aaron entered his peroration, Jonah started down the catwalk steps to join Philip, and by the time the applause diminished and the mingling and music resumed, they were greeting each other with a back-pounding hug. "How goes the fight against corporate legal liability?" Philip asked in his lilting Kenyan accent.

"Better than the mayor's plan to turn all of Broadway into a giant bike lane," Jonah answered. Philip was an aide to the mayor, could frequently be seen ("as an advertisement of his honor's diverse administration," as Philip put it) standing back and to the left at press conferences. "Was that your

idea?"

Both without drinks, they reflexively started moving toward the bar. "Your attendance tonight is a pleasant surprise," Philip told him. He'd been educated in British boarding schools, and as a consequence tended to speak in these grandiloquent, contractionless sentences.

"We finalized a settlement today, so I got to leave before midnight."

"Congratulations on both counts." As they made their way through the crowd, Philip stopped every so often to shake a hand. Watching him—dressed nattily in a powder-blue suit, smiling with consistent gladness into every face he recognized—Jonah could easily imagine Philip in the role he openly aspired to: mayor of the city. It wasn't impossible, either: He had the intelligence, the résumé, the politician's instinctive cunning (he always won when he and Jonah played chess); he networked relentlessly (though not as effortlessly as Aaron); and, as he often pointed out, there was now a Kenyan in the White House and a bachelor in the mayor's office. The political era redounded favorably on his prospects.

When they reached the bar, Philip ordered a vodka tonic, Jonah a Scotch. As they waited for their drinks, Philip eyed the same brunette in green whom he'd been all-but-ogling during Aaron's speech, now a few feet up the bar from them. "I have observed a strong correlation between QUEST donors and Pilates classes," Philip murmured.

"Quant analysis at work," Jonah laughed. "You going to ask her if she wants to do a quick abs session after this?"

"Unfortunately," Philip sighed melodramatically, "by rule I am no longer permitted to make such invitations. Aaron sent a rather strongly worded email regarding proper conduct at QUEST events. Evidently there is concern that certain members of the board do not display the appropriate motives in attending these gatherings."

"I wonder what that could refer to?" Jonah said.

Philip sighed again. "If I am not for my cock, who am I for?" As their drinks arrived, he added, "I may resign in protest."

"But then what about New York City's schools, right?" Jonah said, and Philip laughed.

This laughter was not surprising—but Jonah had not entirely been joking. He understood that Philip's membership in QUEST was mostly gamesmanship—part of a rivalry that went back to the days when Philip and Aaron were both charismatic freshmen on the same floor at Princeton. Yes, it helped Aaron to have a black mayoral aide on his board, but it also gave Philip access to all of Aaron's contacts; and he could always vent his frustration at being hierarchically beneath Aaron in the organization by trying to sleep with as many of these contacts as he could (though it seemed Aaron had put a stop to that tactic within their "friendship"). But either as a lingering effect of his conversation with the Hasid, or because of Aaron's speech, or because of what Patrick had seen him doing—or from some combination of all the events across the entire evening—Jonah found he wanted some reassurance that there was more going on that night than an open bar and calculated networking. He took a sip of his Scotch and said to Philip, "Seriously, though. Don't you think QUEST makes those schools better?"

Philip gave him an amused, quizzical frown—and in his imitation of an American accent (which veered sharply toward the Texan), he repeated, "Seriously?"

This skepticism wasn't surprising, either. Seriousness had never figured prominently in their friendship. "Indulge me," Jonah said.

Philip tapped the tip of his broad, somehow regal nose, making a show of thinking. At this point Jonah realized he should not have sought reassurance as to the hopes of saving New York's schools from a man with a career in city politics. "When you consider this notion of applying the tactics of the financial industry to schools, you ought to remember what happened to the financial industry. More fundamentally, I would not rely too heavily on improved standardized test scores as an indicator of improved education. It would seem to me that filling in bubble sheets is a bit of a skill unto itself, maybe not so different from being good at Halo. That hasn't helped New York students much, either." He took a long sip of his drink, put the glass gently on the bar. "White liberal guilt is really all this is in aid of, I am afraid. White liberal guilt and another bullet point on Aaron's résumé. You want to see a school in need? Come to Africa." He shrugged nonchalantly. "But then perhaps I am compromised by my irritation at the founder's sudden bout of Puritanism. Do you, Counselor, believe QUEST does any real good?"

Jonah thought for a moment—and then held his forefinger and thumb apart as if he were presenting an invisible jelly bean. "A smidge," Jonah said. "Even if the tools are imperfect, even if the motives are, let's say, mixed—it's still more effort and attention than these schools usually get. It's better than nothing for your poor black future constituents in Harlem, who deserve something, even if they do have access to clean drinking water."

Philip smiled, and then let out with one of his great, sustained, diaphragm-supported laughs—his most distinctively Kenyan feature, Jonah felt, even beyond his accent. "I concede to the smidge," he declared. "It is a smidge more than we would do otherwise, it is a smidge more than not doing anything at all."

"It's the twenty-five percent tip for the cab driver," said Jonah. "It's holding the door of the elevator for someone crossing the lobby."

"It is helping an elderly lady get her bags from the overhead compartment," said Philip.

They toasted to the smidge. It was an idea coated in irony, of course—but it had a core of comfort, too. As they lowered their glasses, Philip asked, "And where is the lovely Sylvia Quinn this evening?"

"Chicago," he answered. "Work."

"Anything interesting?"

"Interesting enough that she can't tell me anything about it."

"She is an impressive woman," Philip said. "You are a lucky man."

Jonah sighed uneasily. "Patrick Hooper saw me and Zoey out the other night," he told him. He added, "Not doing anything, I don't think, just—out."

Philip gave him a sad sort of smile. "That is still going on, then?"

"The worst part is I told Sylvia I'd move in with her," he said, feeling guiltier than usual at verbalizing this.

"So much for the smidge."

Jonah made small half-turns of his glass on the bar, watched the liquid slosh in tiny waves. These moods came over him, too—guilty, remorseful—but he'd learned that unfortunately, like their antipodes, they never lasted long, eventually gave way to lust, or boredom, or whatever name he might use for the inexplicable attraction that drew him to Zoey—over and over and over. "I guess I did sort of lose my bearings," he confessed.

Philip gave a noncommittal shrug. Jonah was sure Philip thought what any reasonable person would think: that he should end it with one or the other. But along with its lack of seriousness, their friendship did not admit the giving of sincere personal advice, either. It was a limit Jonah had noticed in nearly all his male friendships (maybe it was as much a foundation as a limit). So whatever Philip actually thought, all he said was, "Well, these things do happen."

Aaron Seyler was working the crowd not far away—drawing in all the nearby attention rather in the manner of water flowing to a drain. The brunette Philip had been eyeing was herself now making moon eyes at Aaron. He accepted all the adoration with an affability that approached grace. "Was he always like this?" Jonah asked.

Philip watched Aaron for another moment, weighing, Jonah guessed, all manner of respective advantages and deficiencies in a man who could quite possibly be his rival one day for the Democratic nomination for mayor of New York. Finally he said, "Aaron sees himself as entirely smidge. He makes no distinction. He believes in QUEST, he believes QUEST is improving schools, he believes he is the person best suited to lead such an organization, or any organization, for that matter. In brief, he believes in something. Namely, in Aaron Seyler, which is what makes him so extraordinary, even in this room of rather extraordinary people."

Jonah watched as Aaron went on smiling and accepting congratulations and paying earnest attention to everyone and evidently doing as much—more—than anyone could ask to elevate the underserved and underprivileged. But it occurred to Jonah: If Aaron cared so much about New York City students—if any of them did—why weren't they teachers? "He believes his own bullshit," Jonah said. And somehow it was at this moment that he decided, with full conviction, that he would end things with Zoey. It was, he concluded, the right thing to do.

He sustained this conviction through the rest of the cocktail party, and through the point on his cab ride home when he sent Zoey a text message: "Lunch tomorrow?" Then he immediately felt the uneasiness and preemptive regret that always accompanied his decisions to end relationships with women—but he told himself this was just the inertia and selfishness talking.

Zoey didn't respond for more than an hour, which wasn't surprising, since she'd told him she was spending the evening with Evan, her (quasi-) boyfriend. By the time his phone finally chimed with her reply, he was undressing in his bedroom. "yes but only lunch. Z = busy bee tomorrow."

Jonah smiled and wrote, "Busy tonight?" because the fact that she was texting meant maybe that

Evan had left, and with Sylvia in Chicago, they— He resummoned the guilt—he erased the message. In its place, he wrote, "Cool, only lunch. Meet @ 1 @ yr office?"

It was several minutes before the reply came: "i'm too fat for lunchtime quickies now??" Then, in another minute: "i know, i know. don't judge. i have the spoon in my hand. dignified lunch @ 1, schtupping to be scheduled."

He smiled again at the text—and then frowned. Didn't he find all this charming? Didn't he want to schedule schtupping as much as she did? Why exactly was he going to do this again? The answers came to mind: Sylvia, Evan, the momentum he'd built up toward doing it—the guilt now reasserted itself. "See you tomorrow," he wrote—then added, "baby," because he didn't want to worry her (or at least that was why he told himself he did it).

But after he'd hit send and tossed the phone onto the bed, he did feel better: relieved that at least there'd be some resolution—and proud of himself that he had dealt (or anyway was going to deal) with a difficult situation, rather than be tossed back and forth between guilt and self-indulgence. More: He had done the right thing.

And then Jonah caught sight of himself in the full-length mirror on the inside of his closet door. He was naked by now—and for an instant, he saw himself as he would a naked stranger, without the benefit of protective biases, the protective measures he reflexively took. He saw himself with his stomach unflexed, his shoulders slumped, his expression dull—flaccid dick exactly as large as it was. He was confronted with the image of a man closer to full-blown middle age than full-blown youth: He saw flabbiness at the torso, he saw roundness at the thighs and arms, he spotted grayness among the trimmed black hair above his ears. And even more—he saw in the lengths of pink-pale flesh a naked man of jarring vulnerability, of shockingly finite proportions—woefully overmatched for the events of the day, of the life to come. He turned from the mirror uneasily—immediately pulled on the boxers he'd dropped on the floor, flexed his abs and chest, closed the closet door. He picked up his phone, thinking he might call Sylvia—but saw he had an email from Doug Chen, a partner at his firm, requesting a meeting the following day. Jonah had good instincts for these things; he sensed there was something positive in this for him. After he'd replied to the request in the affirmative, he scrolled through some other emails, checked the weather for the following day, checked the Yankees score, added the meeting with Doug Chen to his calendar, added the lunch with Zoey without any attendant emotion, shuffled idly through the phone's collection of names and numbers and apps and games—tools to reach and decipher and shape the entire world if he wanted. The world was so fucking manageable when you looked at it through an iPhone. He turned off the light in his bedroom and got into bed; he wrote Sylvia a text message: "Hope you get out of there before midnight. Love you"; he set the phone's alarm for six the next morning, the glow of its screen on his face the last thing he saw before he closed his eyes—

And Jonah felt much better.

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