

THE *Literati*

A Novel



HARPER
MUSE

SUSAN COLL



HARPER MUSE

The Literati

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Give them bread and circuses, and they will never revolt.

—Juvenal



For Charlie, who tells the best stories



Tuesday



Chapter 1

PROUDLY, FIERCELY PUNCTUAL, Clemi arrives at 10:00 a.m. and finds a very large cat sitting on Howard's desk. It is greyish and brownish, this cat, with a long tail and piercing green eyes. Clemi does not know cat varieties especially well, and has never thought much about them, but this looks to her like your basic cat, a run-of-the-mill *Felis catus*, albeit one that has been overfed. It looks to her like a cat's cat. A Volkswagen of cats, more bus than bug, which is not meant as disparaging since at this point in her life Clemi cannot imagine having the funds to care for either a cat or a vehicle, whether run-of-the-mill or extremely posh.

The only especially notable thing about this cat, apart from its size, is that it happens to be here, planted atop the papers strewn across the executive director's massive banker's desk.

The cat stares at Clemi. Clemi stares back at the cat, holding its gaze. If she looks at it long enough, perhaps the creature will explain itself.

Something is off, clearly. Or maybe not. This is the beginning of what will be Clemi's second week on this job, so she doesn't have enough history at WLNP to say what is normal

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and what is abnormal. Perhaps an occasional cat visitation is a regular thing, like Bring Your Kid to Work Day, except with cats. Or maybe the cat has been here all along, curled up discreetly in a corner, although that seems less likely, given that this is a one-room office and Clemi is allergic to cats.

It is the Tuesday after a three-day weekend, so perhaps she is just bleary-eyed, hungover, hallucinating this cat. She is not much of a drinker, but she did meet River—her sort-of-ex-boyfriend turned sort-of-friend—at a taquería last night, where she downed a margarita and chased it with a bean burrito, several fistfuls of tortilla chips, and a spicy shroom taco. The regrettable smorgasbord has left her simultaneously bloated and dehydrated. On top of which, the fire alarm had gone off in her apartment building at 3:14 a.m., and she was forced to evacuate, descend six flights of stairs in flip-flops and her unflattering nightshirt, too groggy to think to grab a robe, and then stand on the sidewalk for some forty minutes while the fire department conducted a thorough inspection and then declared a false alarm.

Perhaps Clemi's sleep deprivation is causing everything to look askew.

Yet everything *is* askew—and it's not just the anomalous presence of this cat, or the mess of paperwork on this desk. As she looks around the office, Clemi sees that the drawers of the three filing cabinets that line the wall to the left of Howard's desk are open, and the contents have been disgorged onto the floor. Stepping closer to inspect, she finds empty folders, papers and more papers, expired wall calendars, a decapitated bobblehead of Washington Capitals captain Alex Ovechkin, and several boxes of obsolete business cards imprinted with the

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former, now-verboden name of this organization, which presently goes by WLNP: Washington Literary Nonprofit. Some of the business cards bear names of employees whom Clemi presumes to be long gone.

She wonders whether she ought to be on guard, or whether she should flee the premises. Clearly something strange has happened here, but the cat looks calm, utterly unperturbed. She doesn't know all that much about feline behavior, but she imagines that if she were in imminent danger—if a heavily armed perpetrator were hiding under the desk, for example—the cat would give her some sort of clue.

That said, this desk, which is either an antique or a thrift store special, is large enough to be housing an entire gang of modest-sized perps. She pauses a moment to imagine, irrelevantly, how they even got this ancient, bulky thing up the stairs and through the doorway of this small room. Perhaps the answer is simple: Maybe the legs come off, ditto for the slab of wood on top. Or maybe the desk was native to this spot, and the rest of this Georgetown brownstone was built around it to accommodate its splendor and girth, like a heritage tree of the sort one is not allowed to chop down.

Yet for all she knows of cats, this creature might be staring at her peaceably even as Howard is being held at gunpoint or chained to the radiator with duct tape across his mouth in the bathroom, a thought which propels her to boldly turn the corner to inspect. Maybe she ought to be more cautious, to perhaps call the police, but then that seems an overreaction; she can't help but wonder how deranged a hypothetical brigand or band of brigands must be to hold up the offices of a not particularly well-endowed literary nonprofit.

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Nudging the door open with her hip, Clemi peeks inside and looks around. The bathroom—with its original, now-crumbling basket weave floor tile and slim, rectangular pedestal sink—is empty. The trash can is overflowing. Someone has left the toilet seat up. In the corner is a bowl full of fishy-smelling cat food that appears to be untouched.

Her contemplation of the bathroom is interrupted by the trill of a phone. She returns to the office and looks around for the source of this overly loud, theatrical, make that *vaudevillian* noise. The sound is emanating from a black, old-fashioned landline phone sitting on the credenza behind Howard's desk. Like much else in this office, the phone is of another era, complete with a rotary dial and one of those long rubbery stretchy cords that knot up and tangle. Clemi stares at it for a moment, not entirely sure of the appropriate etiquette, then picks up the receiver and presses it to her ear.

"Hello?" she says into the strange gizmo. It is so heavy it momentarily disorients her, as does the rush of loud static. "Washington Literary Nonprofit," she announces. "This is Clementine speaking."

More static. She wonders whether this crackling electric noise is part of a thing that occurs with these old-fashioned phones—a prelude to the conversation, perhaps, like an orchestra warming up. She waits a beat, then repeats her greeting, again to no avail.

She is about to replace the speaking device when she hears what might be the sound of a person coughing, then a possible crashing noise, and then, an unmistakable human wail. Might this phone call be related to the disarray in the office? Maybe Howard *has* been kidnapped. Maybe someone is calling to

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demand a ransom. Or maybe someone is calling looking for the cat.

At last, a melodic, female voice breaks through the cacophony.

“Clementine, my darling! Oh, my darling Clementine,” the woman sings. Although Clemi is used to this joke, any reference to an old folk song circa the late nineteenth century and a black-and-white shoot-’em-up Western that features her name, Clemi could do without. She once looked up the origin of the song and learned that the titular Clementine is either presumed dead or has been reimagined as a 299-pound woman who is mistaken for a whale, depending on the version invoked.

“This is Zveta,” she says. “Zveta Attais.”

Sveta Attais!

Clemi tries to remain calm. To be professional. To not act like a fangirl, to not scream out Sveta’s name. (It’s spelled with an *S*, yes, but pronounced with a *Z*—Zveta. Clemi knows that.) To not let on that Clemi mainly took this job because Sveta Attais has won this year’s WLNP Chestnut Prize for Prescient Fiction (an honor that has been discussed internally at WLNP, but has not yet been publicly announced) and will be coming to the ceremony on Friday, where Clemi will get to meet her literary hero in real life.

Clemi is not unfamiliar with famous writers, and she is not easily impressed. Famous writers are, to her, a dime a dozen. She means no disrespect in saying she could go the rest of her life without encountering another famous writer, or in thinking they are—with exceptions, of course—generally a bunch of narcissistic head cases.

She is not without the standing to say this. Clemi’s mother

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is a big-deal literary agent, and her semi-estranged father is, himself, a famous poet. She grew up in a household with famous writers coming and going, sometimes spending the night in the attic guest room when they were in from out of town or if they'd had too much to drink, or, in more than one instance, crashing upstairs for months at a time while waiting for book advances or grant money or royalty checks to come through so they could afford to sign a lease on an apartment someplace and pay their rent once again. For two years, one acclaimed narrative journalist who had been living rough as part of his immersion reporting for his book on the unhoused population of the Pacific Northwest lived with them after his wife kicked him out and he became unhoused, himself. Another prize-winning memoirist lived with them for months while detoxing from a double addiction—pills and liquor. Sometimes Clemi would wake to find famous authors sitting at her kitchen table in their pajamas, emptying into their bowls the dregs of her favorite breakfast cereals. Another author of note, a Booker Prize winner, once borrowed—and totaled—her mother's car.

Then, in a career move an uninitiated observer might deem masochistic, Clemi went on to work at a bookstore. In reality, alas, this was one of the few jobs for which she was innately qualified. Her knowledge was practically encyclopedic; she knew authors the way some people knew baseball stats. Like some savant of publishing, she could recite the backlist of most well-known (and even little-known) authors, including the publisher and pub date, and she was one of few people at the store who arrived with an understanding of how book distribution works and which imprint belongs to which monopolistic house.

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On the one hand, this knowledge significantly lowered the learning curve at work. On the other hand, her job put her in daily contact with an endless stream of authors wishing to speak at the store, where she was then asked to cater to their fussy greenroom needs, order their obscure backlist titles, and procure their specified-to-the-precise-millimeter Sharpie pens. She has unambiguously had enough of authors, yet here she is, repeating history by accepting the position as the programs director for WLNP because—Sveta Attais!

She is as giddy as a Taylor Swift fan who has just scored front row tickets for a concert, or better yet, backstage passes.

Sveta's new novel, *The Marrakesh Social Club*, received glowing reviews from all the major media outlets, is both an Oprah and a Jenna pick, and was optioned by the Obamas' production company before she even finished writing the thing. Although Clemi usually bristles at such hype, she was deeply affected by the book about an introverted Bulgarian-born, Moroccan-raised, biracial college student transplanted to 1990s Los Angeles. Clemi found herself highlighting sentences to do with teenage alienation, difficult mothers, and having a foot in two different cultures. (Okay, maybe London, where Clemi relocated with her mother for a few years, is not as exotic as Sofia or Marrakesh. Nonetheless, she found it surprisingly different from the East Coast of the US, so she could completely relate to Sveta's descriptions of feeling displaced.) She dog-eared pages and stuck Post-it Notes on passages that spoke to her or made her cry. The novel so moved and inspired her that it reignited her desire to write, so she'd pulled her mess of a novel-in-progress out of the drawer and signed up for a novel workshop last winter.

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And now, Sveta Attais is on the other end of the line!

“Clementine,” the intoxicating voice repeats. “I wonder if you can help me. I have a bit of a problem. I cannot seem to reach Howard. We had been texting about my travel arrangements, but suddenly the messages stopped going through. And when I tried to call him, I was told the number has been disconnected.”

“That’s odd,” Clemi says. Although maybe not so odd, given the chaotic condition of the office.

“At any rate, darling, I noticed this phone number in the signature line of one of his emails, so I figured it was worth a try.”

“Yes, good thinking,” Clemi says. “Howard is just running late.” She is not entirely sure why she is being protective of a man she has known for all of one week. Why not tell Sveta that she, too, has no idea where Howard is? That she is new to the job and doesn’t know what she is meant to do without his guidance, that it looks like the office has been ransacked? Also, there is this cat.

Because, she supposes, she is inclined to give everyone the benefit of the doubt. Because she is an instinctively loyal employee to a fault. Because, as her mother would be quick to add, she is naïve.

“Well, at least I have you now,” Sveta continues. “My travel arrangements are not yet complete, you see.”

“Ah, I can help you with that,” Clemi says enthusiastically. She has not yet helped anyone with travel arrangements, but this was described to her as part of her job. She’d presumed Sveta’s travel had already been organized by Clemi’s predecessor, someone named Didi Feldman. Who this Didi is, or was, or where she went, Clemi has no idea, but it doesn’t particularly

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matter. Clemi was told that in the short term, all she needs to do is show up at the awards gala on Friday to help Howard execute what has already been set in motion.

“Fantastic,” Sveta says. “I need to upgrade my ticket, if you wouldn’t mind taking care of that. And, of course, I’ll need to upgrade Vlad’s ticket too. Well, I misspoke really. Vlad didn’t have a ticket before, but he needs one now, and it will need the upgrade.”

The cat yawns, then rolls, or, really, collapses onto its side and stretches out its big paws, sending a thick wad of paper and Howard’s jar of pens onto the floor.

“Vlad?”

“My son.”

“Oh, yes, of course.” Clemi now remembers the effusive dedication of her book:

To Vladislav, my moon and my sun.

Clemi had assumed this Vladislav person was her husband. Or lover. Or maybe her dog. Sveta is a famously private woman who discloses little of her personal life, so, understandably, Clemi was not aware she had a child.

“If you don’t mind saying, upgrade to . . . what?” Clemi asks. “I’m new here, and as you know, Howard isn’t in yet today. I’m sure he’ll be here any minute, but just in case, can you give me the details?”

“I need to upgrade to first class. I have a note from my doctor, if that’s helpful for whatever. I did something to my back. I foolishly tried to pick Vlad up. He’s really too big for that now, I can barely lift him, but you know how that is, he wanted to cuddle. I must have pinched a nerve. The pain is indescribable. The only way I can make that long flight is if I’m able to fully

recline.”

“Oh, how awful! I’m so sorry! It’s good of you to come all this way, given the situation. If you can give me the details, I’ll call the airline right away.”

“Dodi has all of that information.”

“Didi no longer works here. But I’m here now and happy to help.”

“Thank you, love. So I think you might have to cancel my original ticket from Los Angeles to DC. What happened was that I came here to my cousin’s wedding last weekend, and then this thing happened with my back, so I’m sort of stranded. I was hoping it would have resolved itself by now, but I’m still in tremendous pain.”

“Oof. Okay. So we are not upgrading—well, we *are* upgrading—but more accurately, we are changing the ticket entirely?” She hopes this doesn’t sound hostile; she is just trying to get it right. “I’m really sorry to hear this, that you are in pain,” she says again. “It’s good of you to come, and I’m happy to take care of all of this. So, you are where?”

“Casablanca.”

“Oh. Wow. Like *the* Casablanca, in Morocco?”

“Yes, that’s the one. And, originally, I was flying out of LAX,” she repeats.

“Got it.”

Clemi has no idea what two last-minute, first-class tickets from Morocco to DC might cost, but this can’t be good.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Clemi asks, “can you email me your current ticket information, so I can have something to work with? I’ll probably need other info too, like your birthday, passport number, plus Vlad’s info, of course.”

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“Your Dodi has all of that, darling. Listen, I have to run.”

“Okay, but—”

The line is cut before Clemi can finish the sentence. Even the static has ceased. There is nothing but silence. No information to work with. This old-fashioned phone line is now as useless as it looks.

Clemi sneezes.

The cat begins to snore.



Chapter 2

AS CLEMI SETS the receiver back onto the strange rotary dial—equipped contraption, pressing it neatly atop the two white knobs that retract, she feels a sudden spasm in her back. Granted, she is a cerebral, bookish sort who could benefit from a healthier diet and a more active lifestyle, but even in her current groggy, hungover, bloated state, she is surely not so unfit as to have pinched a nerve simply by lifting a telephone receiver. Probably this twinge is psychosomatic, the power of suggestion, or even some subliminal attempt to be one with Sveta Attais—a sister in back pain. Or, more likely, it might be the effect of her first-ever yoga class over the weekend.

Her current apartment-sitting gig has landed her in a brand-new complex that compensates bougie amenities for what it lacks in soul. Situated just two blocks from the Metro, it features a lovely if overpriced café that sells \$12.50 bags of addictive granola and a taquería with a menu full of entrées with amusing names like El Gringo and Chicken Cesar Chavez. Clemi wants to eat them all, and sometimes nearly does. There is also a gleaming, overly air-conditioned grocery store with wide aisles full of prepared gourmet food, and a boutique gym

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that smells like eucalyptus and is stocked with fancy shampoo.

One of the perks of apartment-sitting is that she has been gifted a six-month membership to the gym, which she is determined to use.

The apartment belongs to the writer Fiona Ceras, one of her mother's clients. Fiona needs someone to take care of her plants while she is at a long-term writing residency in Upstate New York. In addition to the gym and the grocery store and the eating establishments she can barely afford, there is also free parking for the car Clemi does not own, as well as dozens of EV charging stations that apparently mostly do not work and are a frequent cause for griping overheard in the elevators. She has also been told to make use of Fiona's fancy coffee contraption and the automatically replenishing special brew pods—the ristrettos and gran lungos and espressos—some of them, according to the labels, rare crafted from exquisite beans not found anywhere else in the world. As amazing as these perks are, Clemi didn't need any additional enticements. Fiona had secured Clemi's apartment-sitting services with the words *free rent*.

This is the most beautiful apartment she has ever lived in, and the most beautiful gym she has ever awkwardly performed yoga in. The entire apartment/gym/restaurant/grocery complex has only been open for a year, erected on the grounds of what had once been a sprawling senior living facility run by the Methodist Church. Setting aside the matter of the displaced seniors, several of whom were depicted on the front page of *The Washington Post* sitting in wheelchairs with their possessions piled high beside them, this new development encapsulates the things urban planners talk about when they trumpet

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smart growth, which Clemi knows a little bit about, having listened to an author, Helmut Erickson, opine on this subject at the bookstore. She remembers his book, *Perfect Cities*, and the discussion of compact design, walkable urban centers, and outdoor community spaces. She seems to recall that part of the smart-growth plan is meant to include affordable housing. The prohibitive rents here are anything but affordable, but at least, for six free months, it is affordable to her.

Sometimes Clemi thinks that most of what she knows in this world can be traced to her time spent absorbing author talks at the bookstore. Her favorite English professor, the one who instilled in her a love of Iris Murdoch, once quipped that the purpose of a liberal arts education was to enable one to engage in cocktail party banter, and Clemi cannot deny this is somewhat true. Between her English degree and her bookstore job, she knows a little about a lot, but not much about anything except, perhaps, the business of books, and while this may not be much, it is at least more than River, her ex-whatever, knows from his consumption of TikTok, which does not prevent him from opining confidently on subjects he has learned about in thirty-second video clips.

At the yoga class on Saturday, she had situated herself on the only available remaining mat, which was very unfortunately in the front row of the studio. Not only was she in the front, but she was situated directly across from the instructor, who practically radiated well-being with her lithe, elastic limbs and

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charismatic smile. Clemi knew that the woman, who introduced herself as Nisha, had nothing but good intentions, but she wished Nisha might have left Clemi in peace to perform her postures imperfectly—falling out of tree pose or doing sun salutations with all the grace of a lumberjack—rather than constantly using Clemi as an example of what not to do.

Worse, on the mat next to her had been a man who looked familiar. She knew him from somewhere; she just couldn't say where. Was he a friend of her mother's? She is lousy at guessing ages but estimated that he is in his forties. Maybe a little younger. Possibly a little older. Everyone in that general age range looks more or less the same to her eye. Perhaps he was one of the customers at the bookstore where she had worked until two weeks ago.

She wished there was an app for this—a sort of Shazam, where instead of uploading a snippet of a song you want to identify, you snap a photo. Probably such a thing exists, but even as a twenty-six-year-old passably tech-savvy person, she sometimes finds it difficult to keep up. She had looked again—thick bushy hair, delicate features, serious gaze, wire-rimmed glasses placed neatly on a towel at the foot of the mat. Definitely familiar, but why, how?

Whoever he was, and whatever his age, he had no trouble keeping up with the instructor's punishing, endless demands, flipping his dog, standing on his head, going into crow pose without breaking an elbow or even a sweat. He was in much better shape than Clemi was, even if she was younger by ten, or twenty, or even thirty years.

As if this foray into yoga had not been humiliating enough,

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she bumped into him while exiting the class, literally knocking into him and causing him to drop his water bottle, which clanged loudly on the floor. She mumbled an apology and had been tempted to say something more but did not. She didn't want to give the wrong impression, to have him think she was flirting. And she was definitely not flirting. In the wake of the River breakup, she is on hiatus from dating, taking a sort of boyfriend cleanse. Plus, for all she knows, this man is old enough to be too old.

She needn't have worried; he picked up his water bottle and reached into the cubby to retrieve his shoes, giving no indication that he had even noticed her.



Now, as Clemi stands inert, massaging the back of her neck and contemplating the problem of Sveta's air travel, she sees that the cat, after its micronap, is again upright and staring at her with a bemused expression that seems to say, *Congratulations on your new position here at WLNP . . . and lots of luck!*

No big deal, cat! Clemi's a team player; no job is beneath her. She's happy to rebook travel, anything for Sveta Attais.

Clemi pulls out her cell phone and tries to reach Howard. Again, she wonders what might explain the chaotic state of the office. In addition to telling Clemi she is naïve, her mother has also accused her of having an overactive imagination, which she knows is not wholly untrue. Surely there is some rational explanation for the mess—maybe Howard dropped by over the weekend and was in a rush as he riffled through his desk drawers and filing cabinet looking for some very important

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document. After which, he accidentally forgot to retrieve his cat. And this morning he is simply late to work, probably. She now remembers that he's been complaining of a toothache, so perhaps he was able to schedule a morning dental appointment and forgot to let her know.

His number rings and rings and then goes to voicemail. She sends a text but receives no reply.

She logs onto her computer, pulls up Orbitz, and inputs what little bit of data she currently has available. Eventually she will need the details of the original flight, but for now she can at least get a sense of the options. Casablanca to Washington DC on Thursday, arriving no later than Friday morning. Nonstop. First class. Done. Easy as pie.

She waits a moment for the options to load. When they do at last, only one flight listed still has availability in first class. Air France. La Première. This could not possibly be correct. The website must be broken. Surely there are more flights than this. Further, no airplane ticket could possibly cost \$14,098.78.

She then considers that they are likely on the hook to ferry her home to Los Angeles. She does a little more research, and the number inflates to \$15,754.93.

At this juncture, Clemi remembers that she needs not one ticket but two. How old is this Vlad child? Large enough for Sveta to throw her back out lifting him, so presumably he is not an infant, which is too bad, because if he were, he would not need an outrageously expensive seat. Might she be able to send Sveta first-class, and Vlad coach? He could wear one of those signs identifying him as an unaccompanied minor, so he would be taken care of by the crew. That's probably not cool under any circumstances, but especially not cool given that Sveta is

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a literary rock star whose child, too, deserves the very best—not to mention that Sveta is this year's winner of the WLNP Chestnut Prize for Prescient Fiction.

And who knows? Perhaps this is not even the problem Clemi thinks it is. It's not her money, after all. Perhaps first-class tickets are routine for the winners of this prize, and Didi Feldman erred in booking her coach.

As Clemi contemplates the matter, plotting the path forward, her phone dings with a text. It is Howard, thank goodness. She takes a deep breath. More accurately, she *intends* to take a deep breath and even attempts to take one, but her clogged sinuses make a mockery of this effort.

EmeRgency. Soiree. PLS take care of Immanuel.

*Sorry not soiree.

Thank God he is okay, is her first thought. Although maybe he is not okay given his EmeRgency and his screwy typing. Again she remembers his toothache. He had suspected he might need a root canal or even an extraction. Perhaps he is about to be anesthetized. Before she can reply, another text arrives.

BLUE BUffalo Adult Flaked Salmon & Adult Flaked Fish & Shrimp. Two cans x xx day.

Presumably this is for the cat. Whose name is presumably Immanuel. Who names a cat Immanuel?

Two cans once, twice, or three times a day? Also, adult

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flaked salmon *and* adult flaked fish *and* shrimp? Or either, or, or?

Where are you? she types.

Three dots appear, but she waits a full minute and receives no reply.

We need to rebook Sveta's flight.

More dots.

Howard? R U okay?

Howard's reply-in-progress dots go cold. Then, all four of her texts are marked undeliverable. She hits resend to no avail.

This is very weird. Perhaps logging into her email will be somehow illuminating. At the top of her inbox is a message from the board president that appears to have been sent just moments ago. It is addressed to Howard, with Clemi cc'd.

The subject reads: URGENT MAJOR PI PROBLEM.

Cleми is momentarily confused. At first she assumes "PI" has to do with the dreaded mathematical constant that is the ratio of a circle's circumference or relationship to diameter or something she once understood, sort of, but can't possibly begin to remember now. If she is being asked to do anything with math, this is indeed an URGENT MAJOR PROBLEM. But then, it's much more likely that "PI" refers to a private investigator, which would make sense given the state of the office, Howard's possible disappearance, and the mysterious presence of this cat. Now she feels a tremor of excitement. This is all

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very Raymond Chandleresque! Or at least, very Nancy Drew. Perhaps it will give her fodder for her novel. She begins to read the email:

As you know, per the advice of our crisis consultant, we invited our pal Javier Jiménez-Jiménez to be the public intellectual this year. Although he graciously accepted, sadly he passed away following a choking incident at Sfoglina last night. (I've also heard it was a heart attack, so not sure which is true, although possibly both, as in theory, nothing prevents one from choking while in the process of having a heart attack, nor should it matter.) This means we need a new public intellectual ASAP.

This is an unspeakable tragedy—but let's try to look at this as an opportunity to score someone even better known. I was thinking someone like Orhan Pamuk or Umberto Eco, but I know neither is local. Perhaps we could go in another direction entirely, maybe someone along the lines of Barack Obama. Any of these will be fine, but it's short notice, I know, so do your best.

BTW I'm about to head into a conference in Nairobi where I'll be offline most of the day. I'll try to make it on Friday but I have a close connection in Frankfurt, and even if that works, I don't get into Dulles until six and you know luggage and customs . . . plus traffic. I'll do my best but I can't promise, so if someone could be prepared to make the opening remarks just in case, that would be much appreciated.

Cheers,
Eric Jolly, MD

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Crisis consultant?

And *Dr. Jolly*! She has heard about this Eric Jolly, MD. Howard said something indiscreet about the board president not being particularly helpful and had even worse things to say about his book.

“*A lightweight,*” he had said, or rather whispered. This had been on Clemi’s first day at the job, as he was giving her an orientation that included walking her through a who’s who on the board. The comment had made Clemi wince on poor Dr. Jolly’s behalf. Sure, she has her own complicated—and not always generous—feelings about writers *sui generis*, but on an individual level, she tries to be supportive of every person’s work.

At the time Clemi had wondered whether Howard was whispering because the office was bugged—which, who knows? In light of today’s events, perhaps something odd really is going on here. Maybe the nonprofit is a cover for a spy ring! Howard had, after all, made a point of letting her know that the office is less than a mile from the Russian embassy. Had he been trying to tell her something? But even Clemi, with her overactive imagination, cannot convert that into a viable narrative.

Later on her first day, when they were sitting at an outside table at a nearby deli, Howard had elaborated on the Dr. Jolly situation. He’d said he was basically checked out, busy promoting his book, *Liquid Beauty*, which has occupied the hardcover bestseller list for more than five years.

This level of success for the board president would generally be a good thing for the foundation, he’d said. Under normal circumstances, it would lend some increased visibility and prestige to WLNP, except in this case the attention has arguably

had the opposite effect given the “crass commercialism” and “overall ickiness” of the book (his words, not Clemi’s).

He had continued trash-talking poor Dr. Jolly as they walked back to the office. He was so worked up that he wasn’t watching his steps, then had tripped over the root of a tree and fallen face-first onto the sidewalk.

The subject of Dr. Jolly’s book is something called Syntax™, which is an injectable filler. A synthesized version of Botox, he’d explained. The book is not an investigation into the business of Syntax™, or a cultural analysis of the meaning of Syntax™ and beauty culture in general. Rather, it is a love letter to Syntax™, a synthetic version of the botulinum neurotoxin. The book is filled with glossy photographs of Syntax™ successes. Women of a certain age, looking as if they are women of a certain other age, albeit with expressions frozen into place.

Lunch had turned into a very long gossip session, one of what turned out to be many such conversations over the four days they’d had together. Howard had referred to one board member as a tired hack who had only managed to get published because her girlfriend (now wife) was an editor at Scribner. Another board member, he confided, had only been invited to join the board because she was the second cousin of someone who was friends with Mark Zuckerberg at Harvard, which, again, Clemi found puzzling given that the individual in question had written four highly acclaimed novels.

He had also warned Clemi to be wary of one Percy Garfinkle, a board member whose name-dropping was so extreme that he would almost certainly volunteer to connect her, unsolicited, with sundry business tycoons, world leaders, and stars of stage and the silver screen.

Clemi is confused by Dr. Jolly's email, but after rereading it, she realizes that the public intellectual must be a reference to the silent auction that will take place during the gala on Friday. The auction is a relatively new fundraising effort, Howard had told her. It had been his brainchild, and last year—the first year of the effort—they had raised an additional \$30,000. Howard was proud of the literary luminaries he had wrangled to participate this year, Javier Jiménez-Jiménez in particular. A thick stack of cards advertising the silent auction sits on the far corner of Howard's desk, undisturbed by the cat.

Immanuel stares at Clemi as she scoops up the pile of glossy eight-by-tens. She blows some cat hair off the top of the stack and sneezes, then sneezes again.

WLPN SILENT AUCTION

Promoting Literature That Is Prophetic in Vision

- Private lunch at the Tabard Inn with Ellie Grossman, author of *The Snowbirds*

STARTING BID: \$800

- Dinner for four at Masseria with *The New York Review of Books* editor Renata Chakrabarti

STARTING BID: \$2,000

- Weekend in Vail condo, sleeps five, use of snowshoes included

STARTING BID: \$10,000

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- Catered dinner party for ten with Booker Prize–winning author Francis Ruben

STARTING BID: \$10,000

- Private lunch with superagent Lilian Getter; pitch her your ideas for a book

STARTING BID: \$5,000

- Bring five friends to lunch with public intellectual Javier Jiménez-Jiménez, philosopher, historian, and staff writer at *The New Yorker*

STARTING BID: \$12,000

A disclaimer, set in a wispy italic font and tucked discreetly at the bottom of the card, clarifies:

** Auction prices specifically exclude any and all expenses associated with but not limited to food, beverages, accommodations, and travel.*

Clemi has a few thoughts about this situation. The first one is especially practical: Thank goodness Javier's name is listed last, because she could take a pair of scissors and remove his name, then salvage each card with a strong transparent adhesive. (Packing-grade Scotch tape might work.)

She flips the card over and realizes there is language on the back, but it is mostly boilerplate about WLNP, including a list of board members, both current and emeritus. Clemi stares at this, considering alternative options. She could take a Sharpie and score through Javier's name. This would be easier, but

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considerably less sensitive—indeed downright grim—given that the gentleman has, so to speak, departed.

Clemi begins to compose a response to Dr. Jolly, explaining that Howard is not in the office today. She considers elaborating, but on the off chance that Howard is having a true emergency and needs the day off, she does not want to get him in trouble.

Still, the problems at hand seem urgent, and she needs guidance. Clemi explains the situation with Sveta Attais's bad back and the need for new travel arrangements that include her child. And she asks for assistance finding a living public intellectual now that JJJ has been relegated to eternal horizontality.

She hits send, then seconds later her email dings. She gets a curt response: Eric Jolly, MD, is OOO.

It is 10:15 a.m. Clemi has been at work all of fifteen minutes, and already she is having a bad day.

Chapter 3

UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, Clemi would not arrive at work at 10:00 a.m. and take a break at ten thirty. She is a conscientious employee. A rule follower. Not someone who tacks a few minutes onto the end of her lunch hour or spends time at work attending to personal matters. But already these do not feel like normal circumstances, so when a text arrives from River, saying: Amazing news, you will be super jazzed!

and when she says: What?!

and when he says: I'll tell you in person

she finds herself saying: Right now pls!

Why does she say this? She doesn't know the answer. She is done with River, or at least trying her best to be. She just saw him last night, and yet here he is again. What news could he possibly have that would make her super jazzed? He has been messing with her mind. Ending whatever it was they had while suggesting he doesn't really want it to end. Nothing short of a personality transplant would convince her to give him another chance, even if at some primal level, she remains more besotted than she should.

But she agrees to meet him because this day is off to an

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inauspicious start, on top of which there is a cat in the office making her sneeze. Perhaps if she leaves and gets some fresh air, then hits the reset button on Tuesday, everything will be okay when she returns. Howard will be at his desk, able to provide leadership, assisting in the reticketing of Sveta Attais, adding Vlad to the itinerary, and procuring the services of a respiring public intellectual. Immanuel, the big fat cat with his imperious stare, will be gone perhaps, even. Not that Clemi has ill will toward Immanuel; she wishes Immanuel a long happy life full of as much BLUE BUFFalo whatever as he'd like. She would just prefer he not continue his long happy life *here*.

Besides, she is a believer in not overreacting, in remaining calm until such a time when maintaining a calm demeanor ceases to be an option. She finds that half the time, when the computer doesn't start, or the dishwasher breaks, or the car—back when she briefly had a car—starts to make a funny noise, just turning it off or unplugging it or whatever one must do to get a fresh start often solves the problem. At least for a little while. Another word for managing problems this way might be *denial*. Such was the case when she briefly owned a used 2011 Honda Civic, which had more than 150,000 miles and was called to eternal rest while under Clemi's proprietorship—barricading Connecticut Avenue during rush hour, causing glares of condemnation and a symphony of horns and cries from appalled motorists.

River suggests they meet at a coffee shop halfway between the WLNP office in Georgetown and the ten-thousand-square-foot

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imitation Italianate villa in Bethesda in which he currently resides. She does not point out that the coffee shop is not technically halfway between them. It is in Chevy Chase, a couple of miles from where River lives, and more like four miles from where Clemi works. But in addition to being generally conscientious and—at least per her mother—a naïve person with an overly active imagination, she does not want to be difficult. She dislikes making a fuss.

One of the first assignments in the creative writing workshop she took last winter was to identify characters' telling details. "Melvin puts catsup on his eggs" was one example the instructor gave them. "Melvin stops to talk with everyone who has a dog" was another.

She had enrolled as part of her New Year's resolution, right after reading *The Marrakesh Social Club*. That is where she met River.

"Clemini tends to fall in love with the same boy over and over," she might have written. "Clemini falls in love with cute, bookish boy-men who talk a good game but are ultimately nonstarters."

She waits for the bus for ten minutes. When it does not arrive, worried she'll be late, she calls an Uber, already throwing off her weekly budget. When she gets to the café, there is no sign of River, so she gets a table in the back of the restaurant, which is surprisingly crowded midmorning, and sends him a text.

Running late, be there in ten, he replies.

She settles in and looks around the room, filled largely with what appear to be retirees with their old-school print

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newspapers and young moms with strollers.

She looks at the menu, studying the various pictures of eggs. Eggs right side up, their yolks an unappetizing sort of fuchsia-orange. Eggs upside down, a too-bright white. Eggs sitting smugly in little cup holders, presumably poached. There are pictures of a wide variety of pastries as well. All of this looks spectacularly unappealing, largely on account of the sticky menus and the anemic lighting employed by the food photographer.

She texts Howard again. Again undeliverable. She has not activated her work email on her phone, which is probably a good thing, since it enforces some time to decompress. Foolishly, she did not bring any reading material, and she has already completed her various daily puzzles, so, instead, she googles “how to find a public intellectual.”

Apparently, this is not a thing. But that’s okay. She is doing this googling exercise as a diversion, an act of deranged amusement. Directions for how to find a wide variety of other things pop up: How to find a slope. How to find standard deviation. How to find horizontal asymptotes. She wishes she were being asked to find one of those things, because those are apparently things one can find. But those are not the things she needs. She does, however, find information on *becoming* a public intellectual, as well as information on what public intellectualism is and why we should care about it, assuming we should. Personally, Clemi can’t think of any reason to care about public intellectualism other than it being a sudden *URGENT MAJOR PI PROBLEM*, a missing silent auction item at a fundraising event that is going to happen in three days.

“The term *public intellectual* describes the intellectual

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participating in the public affairs discourse of society, in addition to an academic career,” she learns. Or thinks she learns, since this is not a particularly illuminating description.

She scans the room again. Were she to run into a public intellectual, this would be a likely spot. This is an affluent neighborhood in a city with one of the highest concentrations of people with advanced degrees in the country. This is your eggs-and-bacon and coffee-from-a-pot-that-has-been-sitting-around-for-hours kind of joint—not one of those hipster coffee shops with pour-overs and cold brews and white chocolate frozen lattes with vegan scones and avocado toast.

Which is to say, if the likes of Umberto Eco or Orhan Pamuk were hanging out at a coffee shop in Washington, this might well be the one. Maybe this will wind up being one of those serendipitous moments in life where the solution to the problem simply presents itself. She will look up from the menu, glance around the room, and find Umberto Eco sitting at the next table, reading *The Washington Post* Style section unassumingly. She will say to him something along the lines of, “Hi! I’m the programs director at WLNP, and this might sound crazy, but our awards ceremony and annual fundraiser is on Friday, and our public intellectual is suddenly unavailable. Might you like to join as our guest? Or . . . actually, you don’t even need to be there”—or so Clemi presumes, since she has never been to a WLNP fundraiser—“But might you donate your time, just an hour or two to have lunch on a date of your choosing with a handful of strangers who will pay \$12,000—maybe even more!—to absorb your wisdom? It’s for a good cause.” (Although is it? This is both a practical and an existential question Clemi has been avoiding asking herself. What, exactly, *is* the

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WLNP cause, apart from celebrating fiction that is *prescient*? What is the point of celebrating fiction that is prescient? Isn't all fiction sort of prescient in one way or another?)

Perhaps this encounter will result in some fantastic story she will later be able to tell her children and grandchildren, about how Umberto Eco happened to be sitting next to her in a coffee shop and she worked up the nerve to invite him to participate in a WLNP fundraising effort, to be an auction item at a gala. And since he agreed, they have remained friends ever since, and in fact he also agreed to mentor her, and then blurbed her first novel, which went on to sell many copies and win many prizes.

It occurs to her that one problem with this plan right out the starting gate is that she has no idea what Umberto Eco looks like, or where he lives, although she is pretty sure he is Italian. She googles Umberto Eco and discovers another problem. Although he looks like he might be friendly and approachable, with a furry beard and a warm smile, he is also, unfortunately, dead. She chastises herself for not knowing this (seriously, how did she *not* know this?), as well as for not having read *The Name of the Rose*. So maybe it is not Umberto Eco she is looking for, but some other public intellectual along those lines.

She checks the time on her phone and once again looks around the room. It's a sleepy crowd this morning, possibly literally. People appear to be inhaling their coffees, flagging down the waiter for refills at three tables simultaneously. Next to her is an elderly man sitting by himself reading a book, and next to him, a middle-aged man wearing a white shirt beneath a rumpled suit jacket. He is leaning in, speaking to a well-appointed woman who is sipping a cappuccino and tapping at

the keyboard of a MacBook Air. Perhaps he's a source on an article she is reporting, or she is his financial advisor, or maybe that's his wife, only half listening to him as he talks. Swiveling her head in the other direction to look behind her, Clemi sees what appears to be a pair of young mom friends having coffee. One woman has a sleeping toddler on her lap, the other has a baby conked out in the stroller that is pushed beside the table, blocking the aisle. They do not appear to be much older than Clemi, which is a lot to take in—the idea that she might already have a kid or two. And beside them is a young woman with purple hair, intently pecking at her laptop. She is writing a novel, probably, Clemi thinks. Or maybe a short story or a poem. Something creative and edifying. Committing to the page a shard or two of meaning about this confounding, combustible world. Perhaps even something people will pay thousands of dollars to learn more about over lunch when this purple-haired woman is auctioned off at a fundraiser, someday. Whereas Clemi is sitting here waiting, somewhat inexplicably, for her ex to arrive with news that will make her super jazzed. Or more likely not.

Her phone pings, and it is River, reporting that he is now a block away.

Booth in back on the right, she replies.

She has known River for only a few months, but already they have been through emotional permutations suggestive of a much longer relationship. When they first met in the writing workshop, it had been one of those magical, or perhaps simply inebriated, encounters where a coffee led to a beer which led to a week spent together at his then-apartment, along with proclamations of love and plans to travel to Mexico together to attend

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his friend's wedding and then, more recently, a sudden cooling off. Longer than usual delays in text replies, a change of plans on the travel, and finally, the dreaded suggestion that They Needed to Talk. That It Was Complicated.

That had been a week ago. It had not been all that complicated. Apparently, what they needed to talk about was how River had become sort of involved with someone. Or really, it seems, already *was* when he and Clemi had first met. A married woman. Significantly older. A novelist. Famous. The disclosures came out in staccato bursts. He had thought it was winding down, maybe even over, which is why he hadn't mentioned it, but now Augusta, the famous married older novelist, has decided to leave her husband and has invited River to move in.

He still wants to be friends. Well, really more than friends. He isn't that into Augusta, he'd explained. He and Clemi are soulmates of sorts. He can't stop thinking about her. That's how she wound up meeting him for tacos the previous evening, when he had suggested that maybe they could go to Mexico after all. Clemi is in no way going to get herself mixed up in this. She is clear about that. And yet there is something about River that she cannot fully let go of, even though she knows she should. She is not an easy mark, not a sucker for physical beauty, and yet there are exceptions, of course. He is, presentation-wise, an enigma of sorts, both sporty and hipster at once. He might be mistaken for a rugby player, or an Olympic rower, or a wrangler of wild horses who wears perfectly broken-in cowboy boots, but one who wears vintage Nirvana t-shirts and is always carrying a novel, usually one that leans pretentious and that he has, if asked, not yet begun to read.

Now here he is, walking through the door of the café, hair

adorably mussed, wearing what look like deliberately, artfully torn jeans and—yes, indeed, yet another Nirvana t-shirt. He spots her in the back of the café and nods in her direction, then makes his way toward her, breaking into his jaunty smile as people look up at him as he passes by. And they do look up, because it is impossible not to look.

“Hey, you,” he says, giving her a quick, confusing kiss that is not quite on the lips but maybe was intended to land there or maybe not.

“Hey,” she says. “Can’t wait to hear what’s up!”

“You are not going to believe it,” he says as he settles into the booth.

“Try me!” She sounds more enthusiastic than she feels. She has begun to detect a pattern: River’s news, while good for him, is rarely good for her.

“I found an agent,” he says, turning to flag down the waiter, then raising the empty cup on the table and pantomiming the pouring of coffee, which seems a little presumptive and annoys her more than it should.

“An agent?” This is not what she expected.

“A literary agent.”

“Yes, of course, a literary agent. Who? Wow! That’s amazing!” This *is* amazing. It is very difficult to find a literary agent, Clemi knows, not because she has tried herself—she has not yet worked up the nerve—but because she knows more than is healthy for any person to know about agenting, having grown up with a literary agent mother. But it is doubly amazing because she has read River’s work in progress, and it is, to be kind, not amazing. It is navel-gazing, plotless, juvenile, pedestrian. And Clemi is, to a fault, a generous reader, one who was often

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chided in the writing workshop for being too kind in her critiques of work that others found middling.

“I had an email this morning from Martha Thomas. She has her own agency.”

“Sure, I’ve heard of her. Congrats! I didn’t know you even had queries out already. Did you finish the novel?”

“No, I mean it’s conditional. She said she’d be happy to read it when I finish, but that she likes it so far and thinks she can sell it when it’s done.”

“Holy cow. How many agents have you queried?”

“Well, in truth, I haven’t really been querying, but Martha represents Augusta, and we had dinner with her a couple of weeks ago, and she offered to take a look.”

And there it is, the confirmation of every niggling suspicion Clemi has had about this Augusta/River romance. Not that she really needed confirmation. Although she tried to give River the benefit of the doubt, to applaud his ability to supposedly fall in love with a woman more than thirty years his senior—old enough to be his mother plus change—it had seemed likely to Clemi, and surely to everyone, that some using was going on.

“Amazing news, right?” he repeats.

“Totally,” she agrees, although it is certainly not, to her, *amazing news*.

“I knew you’d be jazzed,” he says. “See, there’s hope for you too!”

Clemi forces a tight smile and tries not to think too hard about the meaning of this remark. Perhaps it was offered in some spirit of generosity. At the moment, her writing is all over the place. A draft of a first novel in the drawer, fragments of other things in progress. But nothing feels quite ready or right.

Whatever River's intention, she would like to leave this coffee shop right now, before she begins to cry. But she sits politely and lets him prattle on for another thirty minutes or so.

Although Martha the agent is super excited, she wants him to consider switching the point of view to include more free indirect discourse, he explains.

Clemi does not know what free indirect discourse means. Perhaps that is why River is poised for success, whereas she is not. He then shifts the subject to brainstorming potential blurb-ers for his novel.

"Ideas welcome," he says.

"Um, Augusta?" she says, trying to tamp down her sarcasm.

"Well, yes, that's a given. But who else? Do you think it's too nervy of me to ask Barbara Kingsolver? I was also thinking about George Saunders. Maybe also Jonathan Franzen. Doesn't your mother know him?"

"She does," Clemi says. She is feeling anxious, jagged, a little nauseous, even. Is he really suggesting that she ask her mother to help him?

One telling detail about River, in addition to his chutzpah, is that he is a self-motivated speaker. He does not need a call-and-response situation to converse. He is capable of sustaining dialogue entirely on his own, so the fact that Clemi is largely quiet does not mess with his ability to continue engaging. He muses about cities he would like to visit on his book tour, including a recitation of his favorite independent bookstores around the country. A few in Europe as well.

He then veers toward the matter of his revision, and the resolution of a character named Lucas. From what Clemi can remember, Lucas is a twelfth-century monk reincarnated in the

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body of a frog who is captured by an eleven-year-old boy and put in a terrarium. Lucas has been sent to this new life in order to better understand the human capacity to destroy, which he is now absorbing by observing the child. Also, he is smoking a lot of weed. Clemi once questioned River about this, wondering how a frog in a terrarium could be smoking weed, but River had chided her for being a literalist, which was perhaps fair. Who knows, maybe a good novel is hiding in there somewhere, but Clemi has not been able to excavate even the germ of what that might be.

On and on he goes. He is not going to look ahead as he rewrites. Like E. L. Doctorow, he will drive the car into the foggy night, able to see only as far as the headlights will allow, but of course they will continue to illuminate the entire way. Or something. Clemi can't take much more of this, which is fine because River, as it happens, needs to dash.

“Augusta is waiting,” he says. “I’m sharing my news in person with everyone who is important to me. I wanted you to be the first to know.”

Is she meant to be touched by this? Clemi is spared having to react because of a sudden commotion at the table where the two moms are sitting. Coffee is spilled, the baby begins to cry, the waitress rushes over, an older man wearing a beret jumps up from his seat and curses loudly at his companion in what sounds, possibly, like a mix of English and Italian.

Clemi thinks again of Umberto Eco and feels a nearly overwhelming grief about his death. She does not need a therapist to understand that she is experiencing some form of emotional transference, grieving for a writer she has never read because River is a jerk.

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“I’ve got to run too,” Clemi says. She needs to get up from this chair and out of this coffee shop this very second. “Immanuel is waiting for me,” she says.

“Immanuel?”

“Yes, Immanuel,” she says. She doesn’t feel like explaining. Nor does she feel like exploring the possibility that she might be pathetic enough to try to make River jealous by dropping an exotic-sounding, or at least intellectual-sounding, male name, failing to disclose that Immanuel is a big fat cat.

“Let’s hang tonight?” River asks. “We can celebrate!”

Although this is not entirely without appeal, Clemi is determined not to go down that path again. Plus she has had her fill of him today.

“I can’t tonight. I’ve got yoga.”

“Ah, tomorrow then. Namaste,” he says and then kisses her, again, in the general vicinity of the lips.

“Oh, young love,” says the man who is not Umberto Eco but is possibly Italian, sounding wistful as well as lecherous.