

The next thing she knew, all her surroundings had disappeared—replaced with a vast, barren landscape. Jackie was still sitting, though no longer in a chair; instead there was only the hard ground under her, with nothing but rocks on it for as far as the eye could see. Looking up, Jackie saw a single grey cloud coming in fast, but then it seemed to be slowing down, almost as if in reaction to Jackie noticing it; or as if the cloud was somehow heading towards its own predetermined destination in the sky. And now it appeared to have reached the desired spot, as the cloud practically came to a halt in its track.

Then it took off again, but this time the cloud moved downwards, though it wasn't coming down as rain; instead it went on drifting, much like before, but vertically—descending to earth, while still mostly maintaining its original shape. And yet the closer it got to the ground the less solid the cloud appeared. It was dividing itself, becoming multiple separate entities that eventually all made contact with the ground in exactly the same moment.

None of them looked like clouds anymore, but rather as a group of people made of cotton. They were cloud mannequins, standing still—at first, until they went on drifting along the ground, towards Jackie. It was the same movement as before, when they had all been one big, greyish ball up in the sky, yet each individual cloud-figure now gave the impression of marching.

Jackie felt that she had made eye-contact with the cloud-person that appeared to be in the front, though there were no eyes to look into in that empty, white shield of a face.

“Some of us are always the same,” it said.

Jackie was looking up at the ceiling of a car. She was lying in the backseat. Through the window she could only see the overcast sky.

What had she been dreaming? Something with clouds and the sky—though that was all she could recall. This was much the same as what she had experienced when she had woken up in Wesley’s studio apartment and then hadn’t been able to remember anything at all—only this time she was aware of what had happened before she passed out. She remembered Wesley taking her to his car, in the garage under the building. Once they were on the road Jackie got to witness what had become of a city in the state of anticipation for the arrival of a meteor.

At first there seemed to be no other cars around, as Wesley drove along the street that Jackie had seen earlier through the window of his apartment, with the wreckage of the chair he had thrown out now getting in their way in the middle of the lane. That was merely the first sign of disorder, with many more to follow. As soon as another car appeared Wesley had to swerve out of its way, onto a sidewalk, nearly hitting a light pole. Jackie heard a scream and then another car emerged, also heading in their direction, but this one made a sharp turn and thereby avoided driving straight into them. Why was no one staying in their lanes?

It was because of the other people out there, those who weren’t going around in cars, Jackie realized—the pedestrians

who were all over the road, even throwing themselves in front of moving vehicles. She noticed people lying motionless on the ground, as well.

Wesley had been taking Jackie to the train station. As she was lying there now it came back to her how he had suggested that they take the subway—not that he had imagined that the underground trains would still be running, but rather that the empty tunnels might offer a safer passage for them to get to the train station.

“Unless there are trains that have been hijacked,” Jackie had said. That could easily be, just like that shopping center had been taken over, by Wesley’s friends and others.

Wesley hadn’t said anything to that. They couldn’t talk much as it was, as he constantly had to be on the lookout for unexpected dangers appearing in the road.

“We’ll need to have food,” he had said at one point. Jackie didn’t object; that had pretty much been their agreement in the beginning, before they had left his apartment, that first they needed to find rations of food to bring along with them. Yet just how great of a challenge that would be Jackie wouldn’t realize until later. The only grocery store that she had noticed on the way had been on fire.

Wesley stopped the car, without pointing out to Jackie first that he had spotted an apartment building by the road that had already been broken into. Several windows had been smashed and the front door thrown down—which only served to make the area seem less safe to Jackie, who had already had her doubts about stopping to get out of the car.

“You’re really going to enter other people’s homes?” she tried.

“It’s either that, or we starve,” Wesley said, then adding, “if we want to go on pretending there’s no meteor, that is.”

Jackie hadn’t protested, yet she would feel constant dread as they crossed the corridors inside the building, checking to see if any of the doors had been left unlocked. They came upon one that was merely ajar and entered that apartment straight away, even though it wasn’t clear to them whether they would be alone in there. Thankfully there had been no one. They ended up finding canned food and boxes of cereals in a storage room. There had even been some food left in the refrigerator. They fitted all of it in two plastic bags, before hurrying back to the car.

What had happened after that?

Jackie figured she must have passed out shortly later. And now she was in the backseat. Wesley was gone. Had he given up on her? Jackie reached for the handle of the door next to her head. It was stuck and the door wouldn’t open.

Jackie’s shock at that discovery quickly wore off, as she realized that the pin to lock the door from inside was down. She pulled it up and tried again. She nearly rolled out as the door gave away. She adjusted herself and stepped out more gracefully, ending up with both feet on the soft ground, to discover that the car had been parked off-road.

The surroundings looked serene enough, though Jackie had found out earlier that safety couldn’t be taken for granted anywhere anymore.

Now someone was coming, running towards her, from the other side of the car.

Jackie felt like taking off herself, to run away, but then turned and saw that it was Wesley.

“*Jack*,” he yelped at her.

As he reached her he grabbed her by both shoulders.

“Thank God,” he exclaimed. “You have to *stop* doing that.”

“What did I do?” Jackie responded, racking her brain over what she could have forgotten that he was referring to.

“Passing out like that,” Wesley clarified.

“You weren’t going to leave me here, were you?”

“What, leave you *and* the car? I’ve actually been standing guard. I figured those shady bastards were less likely to come for the car if they saw me standing next to it.”

Jackie looked around for the *shady bastards* in question. There was no one to be seen. Wesley had managed to get Jackie to a deserted area, after she had passed out. That had probably meant taking a considerable detour from where they had been heading.

“I’ve been pretty useless, haven’t I?” she said.

“Don’t say that.” He didn’t seem to hold it against her. “It’s just those damned drugs you have in you. That’s all.”

“What drugs? What are you talking about?”

“From before. Before they found you at the train station.”

“But I wasn’t on drugs. I would feel it,” Jackie reasoned. “And I don’t think I’ve ever taken drugs.”

“Problem is you don’t remember what happened to you before you passed out,” Wesley pointed out to her. “So that’s a red flag, right there, if you think about it.”

It was hard to argue against that, and Jackie still couldn’t remember how she had ended up in that train station, where his friends had collected her. Yet now she remembered something else—something that seemed to have come back to her, oddly enough, while she was unconscious.

Wesley had already turned away from her. He walked back to the other side of the car, where he then opened the door to the driver’s seat. He sat down in it, but kept the door open and his feet resting on the ground outside.

Jackie followed him.

“It’s not that I can’t remember *anything*,” she said in a calm manner, though she had knots in her stomach over the news she was about to give to him. “I know *where* that piece of paper came from.”

Wesley didn’t attempt to hide his excitement over the matter, as he stared back at her in disbelief.

Jackie realized that perhaps her own apparent lack of enthusiasm over what she was about to tell him would imply to her companion that she was setting him up for a disappointment, though she didn’t feel that way at all; she was hopeful, even—but then, just a few minutes earlier she had been unconscious, and so perhaps it was only natural that she couldn’t display an array of emotions.

“Tell me,” Wesley urged her. “*Where* did it come from?”

“From a professor.”

“A professor?” Wesley slammed his hand against the top of the steering wheel, as if to indicate that it had somehow been obvious all along that the note had come from someone in that position.

“Yes; at university,” Jackie added.

“*This* university?” Wesley asked eagerly. “The University of Blackmill?”

Jackie didn’t know—though that name sounded familiar. She remembered someone mentioning it. She decided that it wasn’t where she had received the note—something in what had come back to Jackie made that clear. Wesley seemed to be growing impatient.

“But why did the professor give that paper to you?” he went on.

“He didn’t even hand it to me in person,” Jackie explained. “He just left it inside some other papers for me to find it there. The most remarkable thing about it was that it was before anyone had heard about the meteor. I couldn’t make sense of it at the time.” Jackie hesitated. Something had just dawned on her.

“Of course,” she said, gasping. “That’s *why* I came here. I was told that the professor had an office at the University of Blackmill. I could never reach him back at my university.”

“I don’t think the trains were still running when the others found you at the train station,” Wesley said.

“So, is the train station far away from the university?”

“Quite.”

“It still makes sense,” Jackie insisted.

“Does it? Does it make sense that this astronomer chose *you* to be the only person to get to know that the meteor was fake?”

“I don’t think he’s an astronomer,” Jackie said, fixating on the ground beneath her feet, so as to avoid getting distracted by anything in her surroundings, while rummaging through her memories.

“What is he a professor of, then?”

“Anthropology, I think.”

“*Anthr-*,” Wesley said. “That doesn’t exactly make him the authority on meteors, does it?”

“I don’t know what to tell you. What he wrote is what makes him the authority. And the timing of it as well: he knew of the fake meteor *before* anyone else did.”

“He predicted it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve told you pretty much everything I know at this point, and we’re not going to get any further unless we find the professor and ask him ourselves.”

“Too bad that’s impossible,” said Wesley, now looking away from Jackie. “The mobile networks are down. So is the internet.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. That must have been a part of this scam. Whoever’s behind it made sure to kill the internet and the mobile networks. That’s what made it *real* to people, convincing them, when it came out that the networks were down *because* of a meteor that was on a collision course with the planet, and that all life on earth would come to an end with the impact. That became as real as the internet not working.”

“I guess the only explanation I can think of is that the professor’s behind the whole thing,” Jackie reflected. “Maybe it’s an anthropological experiment—to see what effects the end of the world has on people’s behavior.”

“You don’t really believe that, do you?”

Didn’t she? Jackie couldn’t tell what she believed, herself. She turned away from Wesley and walked over to the other side of the car. She grabbed the handle of the door in the front, but then discovered that, like the door in the back before, it was locked. Wesley reached out and unlocked the door for her and then Jackie closed the door she had left open in the back before entering in the front and sitting down next to Wesley. He looked at her, waiting for her to say something.

“Should we try to get to the train station then?” he suggested.

“No. Change of plans: University of Blackmill.”

“But you can’t expect the professor to be there now. Not after all that has happened.”

“Even if he isn’t, his office will still be there. Remember this?” She took the piece of paper out of her pocket and dangled it in front of Wesley. “We might find something else he’s written, lying around. Maybe something more informative.”

Wesley heaved a deep sigh. He didn’t come off as being all that happy with what she had suggested. He turned away from Jackie and her paper, to look instead straight out the windshield, but he wasn’t turning on the engine. It dawned on Jackie that she couldn’t take for granted that Wesley would go along with whichever new idea she had. Even if he had accepted to take her to the train station—on the off-chance that there they would find

something that would help her remember what had happened to her—there was no guaranty that he would now agree to take her to another location where they were equally unlikely to find anything that would improve their situation. And driving around had become much less safe than it used to be. At the moment, Jackie couldn't guess what would be going through Wesley's mind, as he sat there in silence. However, she didn't feel any urge to go on trying to persuade him. Even if she wouldn't be able to rationalize it to herself, she felt confident that he would end up going along with her new plan.

Finally Wesley shut the door on his side and determinately put the car into gear.

The relief of discovering that he would oblige Jackie quickly became overshadowed by her worries over the dangers that came with getting back on the road. She felt her stomach churn as the car roared and leaped back into motion. Her memories of what it had been like before were still vivid enough to her, when they had been driving around and only narrowly avoided accidents, several times. The car shook vehemently as Wesley now drove it through the grassy field, and then, with a jump, the car was back on the highway.

The first cars they met on the way were all driving normally, staying within their lanes.

“Don't try to take anyone over,” Jackie cautioned Wesley.

For the moment it seemed as if everything might even go smoothly from this point onwards, and that perhaps they would get to the university without any near-death experiences at all.

“You know what?” Jackie said. “I don’t think that guy in the cave was ever actually going to harm anyone.”

“What are you talking about, Jacks?”

“You know, the one of the prophecy; the man who they thought would wipe out their whole tribe. They thought they had caught him before he acted out his plans, but I don’t think he was ever actually going to do anything against them.”

“Shit, Jackie; you’re hallucinating.”

The word startled her. It made Jackie suddenly aware of the misleading impression she was giving Wesley about her state of mind. Now that she had managed to get him to go along with her plan, this second time, it was as if she was actively trying to talk him out of it. It didn’t even make sense to Jackie why she had brought up this subject in the first place.

“No, I’m not,” she tried. But Wesley wouldn’t hear it.

“Listen, we’ll have to pump those damn drugs out of your system, Jacks. It won’t be pleasant, but we don’t have a choice. There may be a place where I can get the equipment we need to do it.”

“*No*,” Jackie shouted. “It’s *not* drugs. I’m not hallucinating. Look; you’re Wesley, that’s the road, there’s a tree; no hallucinations. No drugs. Just stay on course, please. We *must* get to the university.”

Wesley sighed. He looked just as troubled as before and yet didn’t show any signs of altering the route he had already taken.

“It’s just that what you said sounded crazy,” he said at last. “*The man in the cave.*”

“Forget it. I was just passing the time. I can see that’s not appreciated in this car.”

Jackie couldn’t tell how far they would still be from the university, but she felt discouraged from asking Wesley, now that the last thing she had said to him had brought out such extreme reactions in him. She looked out the window on her side and observed that the suburban area around them appeared peaceful, with no immediate signs of the chaos that they had witnessed in the city, yet the disturbing sights that Jackie had been exposed to before stayed with her—of cars that had crashed, people roaming around, disoriented, aggressive, stripping down completely out in the streets. Could all this really be an anthropological experiment by the professor? And had he then spared Jackie from becoming a part of the madness? Back at the university, Jackie had assumed that the professor had lost *his* mind, but now it turned out that he had saved Jackie from losing hers.

Something else about the professor was coming back to her: she hadn’t been the first one to think that there was something off about him, or that he was unstable. He had had a reputation for it. Jackie had known about it before she had chosen him as a supervisor. Possibly she had read it somewhere. The professor was known in his field for something other than just his academic achievements. Whatever it was, it had played a part in attracting Jackie to choosing him in the first place. That now became clear to her, though whatever that impression was based on remained hidden, in the back of her mind.

“At least no one brought a guitar, eh?”

Paul Ivy opened his eyes and looked around. He had been lying on the ground by himself until now that one of the young women of the campsite had come to join him, and was sitting down next to him. Paul had kept to himself for most of the time he had been there, careful not to do anything that might upset the other people, who had selflessly invited him to stay with them. It was no great sacrifice on Paul’s behalf not to mingle more with them, as he had left the city with the express purpose of not having to deal with any more people in his lifetime. He had felt no sense of loss over it, at the time, while he was running away—however, it was as if staying there on the campsite and observing the others had altered his outlook on humanity, as a whole. There was something comforting about the civilized way in which the families who had gathered there went about their last days alive. Paul felt admiration for them, and yet he hadn’t learned their names, though a few of the residents of the campsite had already introduced themselves to him. Only two of the names had stuck with him: Alfred was the white-haired man who had been the first to approach Paul, and then Paul remembered that Alfred’s wife was Eliza. A few of the others had spoken to Paul after his conversation with Alfred, but every interaction left Paul with the impression that none of the others cared to have anything to do with him and perhaps secretly wished that he would go away. That was what he had gone on believing, up until this moment.

“I’m surprised enough at all the things you *did* bring with you,” Paul responded to the young woman. “It amazes me how organized you people are.”

“Not really organized,” she replied. “I packed the most random stuff myself. Like, my swimsuit—how does that make any sense?” She shook her head at herself.

“No, that was a *good* idea,” Paul said, sitting up. “That way you’ll be able bathe in the river.”

“I never cared for showering,” said the girl. “That’s surely not something I’m going to do when I know I’ll definitely be dead tomorrow. And there won’t even be anyone left around to appreciate what a clean corpse I leave behind.”

It sounded to Paul as if she had come to terms with her fate, and was handling the harsh reality of it with admirable composure. Paul found it curious how well adjusted this delicate creature was to the idea of dying, so as to be able to discuss it so casually with him. The others had seemed to be avoiding the subject altogether in their conversations, which Paul had overheard but otherwise stayed out of.

“This is pretty much just a normal, old camping ground at this point,” the young woman went on. “So that’s why I was saying that I was happy that no one brought a guitar, because I could never stand those people.”

Paul wanted to tell her that she didn’t need to explain herself to him, or to justify anything she chose to say to him; that he was satisfied enough that she was speaking to him, at all. It made Paul become aware of how lonely he had grown. And then, what she said even struck him as insightful: so far he hadn’t thought of

associating the setup there with the camping grounds he had attended in the past. Perhaps it was due to the crowd, which was a bit too far away from what he was used to—not quite fitting into the picture, these stoic, elderly individuals, who had come there to await their own demise in silence, bringing along their whole families, or at least those family members who had agreed to come along. The fact that this young woman was one of them already revealed something about her personality to Paul, that she was that close to her family. If this had been a regular campsite, Paul would most likely have been drunk at this point. And then he would probably have been trying his best moves on this girl in front of him. She was cute enough and, from what he understood, single as well.

She stood up, while Paul was silently appraising her appearances.

“Want to go for a walk?” she offered.

Paul nodded and reached out with his hand for her to pull him up off the ground.

“I’m Helen, in case you didn’t catch it before.”

“I really didn’t. I’m sorry.”

They were safely out of earshot from the rest of the people. If Paul would venture any further away with Helen, the others might even have a hard time seeing the two of them, with all the trees that would end up cutting the view. Paul kept looking back to the tents and the scattered crowd, as if to signal the others that way that he didn’t intend to take off with Helen. Yet he didn’t catch any of them looking back in their direction.

“Which one of these people are you related to?” he asked her.

“Oscar’s my father, and my mother is Jennifer.”

“Jennifer and Oscar, eh?”

“You don’t know who they are either, do you?” Helen smiled. “My father’s actually the reverent of the church where they all met.”

“So it was at church that this whole thing happened?” Paul said distractedly, while he scanned the ground as he stepped on it, half-expecting to see snakes there. “I didn’t even know that. Yet I can’t say I’m surprised.”

“Our church became *unbelievably* popular when people learned that the world was about to end.”

“I had noticed.”

“My father felt awful when we had to abandon it, but at that point the church had become too dangerous; you would actually be risking your life staying there. And, as my father told us himself, it’s just a building. We could start our own church out here in the open.”

“Well, of course. You had the minister.”

Helen stopped in her track and turned to face Paul.

“You must think it’s all pretty pointless, don’t you?” Paul hadn’t picked up on her feeling embarrassed before.

“Look,” Helen went on. “I wasn’t crazy about spending my last days at church, but there were other people there who needed help. They came for comfort and so I thought the right thing to do would be to be there for them.”

“So the other families who are here all came to church and then followed you here?”

“You’ve spoken to old Al already. Is he the only one you’ve talked to?”

She was referring to the white-haired man who had initially invited Paul to stay with them—not the only one Paul had spoken to, but still almost the only one whom he remembered the name of.

“Trusty old *Alfred*, yes.”

“He came to church with his son-in-law and two grandchildren after his daughter committed suicide.” Helen hesitated. “I hope I’m not being insensitive talking about it so bluntly.”

“Look around you, Helen. There’s no one else who can hear you.”

She turned and looked towards the tents, which were almost out of sight for them. Helen turned back to Paul with a look of concern cast on her face. Had she suddenly become afraid of him?

“Unless you think that *I* mind you talking that way,” Paul went on. “Then you have misunderstood my personality. You can say whatever you want with me. You can even use curse words; I won’t mind.”

Helen threw him a smile that came off as condescending.

“I didn’t take this walk to curse.”

“Or just talk about whatever else you want,” Paul offered. He looked into her eyes. “Are you worried that you’re not going to make it into heaven?”

She took a step away from him, before responding.

“That doesn’t worry *you*, does it? You don’t believe in it? You think that it’s all just going to *end* like this. There’s going to be a big blast, and then just *nothing*?”

“I don’t feel the need to speculate on it anymore,” Paul said. “We’re going to find out soon enough, aren’t we?”

“Not necessarily, no,” said Helen. “You haven’t really read up on this thing, have you? Or ever sat through a sermon?”

“Sure, I have. From what I understood there would either be heaven or hell. If there’s nothing, then that would mean I was right.”

“I’m not so convinced about hell, myself. I think you might get off easy; maybe get *exactly* what it is you were expecting. But to answer your question from before: yes, I believe I’m a part of the one percent of people who are most likely to make it into heaven.”

“And then will you get to choose a person to go with you?”

“I don’t think that’s how it works, no.”

“It was *you* who spoke up earlier, wasn’t it? It was you who said Alfred should let me stay?”

Helen sighed and looked around. Paul waited for her to confirm it, yet she wouldn’t say anything. Instead she sat down on the grass.

“You’ll get your butt wet,” Paul cautioned her.

But Helen didn’t seem to care. She proceeded to lie down completely, with her back now wholly on the ground as well. She stayed looking up at Paul.

“Do you think they can see me now?” she said in a lowered voice.

Paul turned to the campsite.

“I doubt it,” he said. “They probably think you’ve run away, or that I kidnapped you.”

“Then this is the most privacy I’ve had for days,” Helen said, stretching.

Paul looked at her, where she was lying on the ground in a pose that wasn’t exactly indecent—not even to the moralists of the campsite—yet the way she was presenting herself to him looked somehow inviting. Paul knelt down, and then lay down completely next to her. He looked up into the overcast sky. He couldn’t tell whether Helen was looking at him, as he suddenly felt too timid to turn to her.

“If the world would end, right *now*,” she said. “Wouldn’t that be a definite sign from God?”

“If that makes you feel any better about the comet coming,” Paul responded. “That it’s a sign from God.”

Helen turned silent. Paul couldn’t think of anything to say, himself. He wondered if she was falling asleep. He turned to Helen and found her staring vacantly up into the sky.

“Is there nothing more to talk about?” he asked.

Helen turned her gaze to Paul, still without saying anything.

Without giving any thought to it, Paul placed his left hand next to her face—not close enough to touch her, but then she moved in with her head, bringing her cheek in contact with the back of his fingers. She kept her eyes closed, a spontaneous smile lighting up in her face that was heart-warming to Paul.

He moved his hand down, all the way under her top, and he took note of how she stiffened as he touched the bare skin of her belly. Hesitantly, he rested his hand there, but then Helen sat up and quickly pulled her top off, directly proceeding to unhook the bra. This time when she lay back on the ground Paul was

distracted by the sight of her bare breasts wobbling. He put his hand on one of them—it felt to him as if this way he were merely obliging her, rather than deriving any pleasure from what he was doing. The whole time he kept wondering how much further she would actually take this experiment of hers.

Helen reached out and unbuttoned Paul's fashionable new shirt. He reacted by unbuttoning her trousers, and then pulling them down all the way. She hurriedly did the same with him, and now the two of them only had underwear on. Paul made the next move. He brought his hand up to her stomach, but then let it hover over her skin as he brought the hand down towards her underwear, entering it as soon as he got there. As he discovered how moist she had become, that sufficed to put out what little had remained of his doubts. He took off her last garment and then his own as well. She spread her legs, and he entered her.

Had he ever been this distracted during sex before? The whole time Paul kept thinking about the incoming meteor. Perhaps it would even hit the earth before he had reached his orgasm. In any case he shouldn't be trying to last overly long. The image of Richie Benton blowing his brains out suddenly flashed before Paul's eyes. He cursed the vision out-loud, as it would likely keep him from finishing in time, before the comet came. Paul opened his eyes and saw Helen smiling, still with her eyes closed—smiling at Paul cursing. Helen kept still; using her hands to keep her legs apart was pretty much all the effort she was putting into the act. All the work going on was on Paul's side. He felt his erection suddenly stiffening and then that rush of a tingling sensation took over. Paul rubbed against Helen more

violently, while she rubbed her whole body against the ground with her back and buttocks. Paul went on, even after it had all passed, as was custom. All the way until he felt that he was losing his erection. He pulled out and collapsed on the ground next to her. Both of them breathed heavily.

“Fucking missionary position,” Paul let out, with a grunt. “Last time I have sex and it’s the *missionary position*.”

Helen laughed.

“Do you find that funny?” Paul asked, feeling satisfied with himself.

“No.” Helen said, catching her breath. “You’re not going to be killed by a comet. My father’s going to murder you.”

She couldn’t contain her laughter. Paul imagined that the people might even hear her all the way back at the campsite.

A sign of the ‘University of Blackmill’ appeared as a mirage to Jackie; it seemed too good to be true that they had reached their destination without having any accidents on the way. Everything had felt hopeless to her up until this point. According to this sign the university was right up ahead, just around the corner.

It stood on a hill, and only the tallest buildings of the campus could be seen from where they were, on the road. Jackie’s feeling of triumph over this accomplishment was already fading to her; now she found herself getting worried. Had this been worth it? What did she truly imagine they would find there?

Wesley turned the car into a small parking lot, which had about a third of the spaces occupied, with ten cars, all parked within the lines—which indicated to Jackie that they had stood there since before the madness broke out. The parking lot seemed to be as close as Wesley and Jackie could get to campus by car, as there was a tall wall in the hill which was meant to serve as gate into the campus. There was no evident way for a vehicle to get beyond it. Presumably there would be an entrance for cars somewhere, but while that entrance was closed it wasn’t even visible. However, Jackie thought she had spotted a couple of regular doors in the gate. Presumably they would lead to stairs, or elevators, to get up to the campus grounds above. Hopefully at least some of the doors wouldn’t be locked or bolted.

Wesley turned off the car where he had stopped it, crossing two spaces. He got out without saying anything to Jackie. She followed him. There wasn’t any need for them to discuss their

plans at this point; their goal remained the same: getting to campus and then trying to locate the professor's office. They walked hurriedly up to the gate, to the nearest door they had seen. As they reached it, Wesley pushed it open and then proceeded to enter into the corridor beyond it. As Jackie had predicted, they came upon a flight of stairs going up.

Wesley started climbing the stairs, without hesitation, but Jackie reached out to stop him.

"Wait. Let's agree," she urged him, "that if we run into danger up there, we *flee* and meet back at the car."

"Of course," Wesley responded.

Jackie felt a momentary doubt; could she truly trust that Wesley would remain loyal enough to wait for her back in the parking lot, if they ran into danger? Wasn't there a chance that, in such circumstances, he would just take off by himself and leave her there? He could easily outrun her, and so he would always be the first to reach the car.

"Let me stay in the front," Wesley said, even though he was already ahead of her, as they marched on up the stairs.

At the top of the flight of stairs Wesley turned right, without considering the other direction. Jackie followed him. Around the corner the corridor led to a glass door with daylight coming in through it. The corridor went on, but Wesley stopped at the door and tried to open it.

As Jackie reached him he was opening the door into a deserted square outside, surrounded by buildings.

"So far, place looks empty," Wesley observed. He marched onwards, out through the doorway.

Jackie stayed behind, feeling as if she should try to get a better sense of where they should be heading before blindly moving on. On the other side of the square there were steps going up to an area that was out of sight for them. The buildings on both sides all seemed to be connected. Jackie noticed several entrances to them, all of which she figured they would end up trying later. Several discarded cartons and paper lay on the ground across the square, as a clear indication that some people had already let loose around there, presumably after the story of the meteor had become known.

Wesley had only just noticed that Jackie was no longer following him. He turned around and called back to her. “Does the campus look familiar?”

He wasn’t being as careful as Jackie would have preferred. She figured that they shouldn’t be taking chances on making loud noises, in case anyone else was still there. In fact, now she could hear someone running, a few people, getting closer to them.

There were four of them, hurriedly making their way down the steps: four young men, one of them bare-chested—a skinny youth, with red and green stripes of paint across his chest and face. Another one of the kids was notably chubbier than the rest, while the other two seemed as if they could be related to each other by how unremarkable they looked. Aside from the kid with the body paint and his chest out, they were casually dressed. All four seemed to be at the right age to be at university.

At the sight of them, Wesley hurried back to Jackie and took a position in front of her, as if not to let the others get close to her.

“Maybe they can help us find the office,” Wesley whispered to Jackie, without taking his eyes off the boys.

The four young men wouldn't have any reason to expect that Jackie and Wesley *hadn't* already lost their minds, just like everyone else. Jackie figured that the safest move would be to introduce themselves immediately, to say something that would demonstrate that they were still sound of mind.

“*We just came to see a professor,*” Jackie called out to them.

“Ain't no professors left on campus,” the painted one called back at her, in a voice that hadn't quite gotten out of puberty yet.

“Yeah, *school's out for summer,* bitch,” one of the others chimed in.

Jackie looked across their faces, without responding. They were all in their early twenties, at most; had probably been immature even before the whole of society got tipped over on its head. While Jackie sensed that she hadn't quite been accustomed to being addressed in such a crass manner, in her previous life, she didn't feel like dwelling on it now. Locating the office of the professor was all that mattered.

“*We still need to have a look around,*” she responded.

“You *can't,*” the painted kid shouted back.

“*Why not?*” Wesley demanded.

“Because *we* run the university now,” said the chubbiest of the four.

“The students,” one of the other two chimed in.

“Yes, the *natives.*”

“Not those *pussies* who ran back home to be with their mommies,” this coming from the bare-chested kid.

“And I guess you guys would be the *pilgrims*, come here to rob us,” the chubby one chimed in again. “History repeating itself.”

“*Listen, we did not come here to take part in your make-belief,*” Wesley called back to them. “*We have serious business to attend to that’s got nothing to do with you.*”

“It’s *our* campus, so it has *everything* to do with us,” the painted kid shouted back.

It seemed as if the four students were preparing for physical confrontation, but then they hesitated and turned around, all as one. Behind them, another group had appeared at the top of the steps and was now marching down. How many the new arrivals were in total, Jackie couldn’t tell, as she couldn’t see beyond the top of the steps; there were at least twelve of them making their way down already. If Wesley and Jackie hadn’t been outnumbered before, they certainly were at this point.

The group seemed to be coming down in a somewhat orderly fashion, as everyone came off as attentively staying behind a young woman who went in the front. She was smartly dressed, in a grey suit. Her blonde, straight, cropped hair was even combed in a presentable manner.

“What’s going on here?” the blonde woman demanded, as she reached the others. The rest of the crowd now seemed mindful not to block her view of Jackie and Wesley.

The painted kid frowned in silence, looking at Wes.

“Nothing,” said one of the other three who had gotten there first. “Just hazing these new guys, is all.”

“Oh, really?” the blonde woman responded defiantly. “*Hazing* would imply that you have offered them a place in our community. That is *not* for you boys to decide, as you know. It’s *erratic*, even. And we don’t want that. Even if they are young people, they may still carry some ignorant views and end up corrupting our campus.”

Despite the initial rudeness, by that *welcoming committee* of four, Jackie had the impression that the student body, on the whole, had managed to remain civil—inexplicably, in the face of their impending doom.

“We were just explaining to these young men that we came here to look for something,” Jackie said, addressing the woman. “If you just let us move on, we promise to be out of your way.”

“If only it was that simple,” responded the blonde woman. “There are too many of us on campus and I cannot take responsibility for all the others. Someone who sees you and assumes that you came here uninvited might actually *do* something to you. However, there shouldn’t be any risk of that if you go around with me. Seeing me with you will make them understand that you are here with my permission.”

“No-“ Jackie began to protest, but the woman had already turned away from her and was heading back in the direction of the steps, with the crowd opening up to let her pass. Jackie turned to Wesley, but the crowd was narrowing in on that side and had already cut her view of him. It seemed evident to Jackie that she needed to get away from the students, if only to be able to spot Wesley, and for that she would have to follow the blonde woman up the steps.

Jackie climbed the steps, with the crowd tailing behind her. Before she had reached the top, Jackie stopped and turned around, but she still couldn't see Wesley. She tried calling his name.

"*I'm here,*" she heard him call back from some distance.

Jackie turned back and hurried up the rest of the steps.

Beyond the top of the steps Jackie found herself in another square. It looked similar enough to the one they had just left, except that this one had a large, circular construction made of stone in the middle of it, like a water fountain without the water, repurposed, presumably to serve as a bench for the students.

Jackie turned around to look for Wesley.

"*Where are you, Wes?*" she called.

"Don't worry," said the blonde woman, appearing right next to Jackie. "This is still just a university. Though it may be dangerous for you to go around by yourself, as I explained to you, you have nothing to worry about, though you lose sight of your friend for a few minutes. We'll catch up with him later."

Jackie went on looking around, but still couldn't see Wesley anywhere. It didn't strike her as a good idea to try to challenge this woman, who seemed to have the whole crowd under her command.

"Allow me to introduce myself. I am Athina."

Jackie assumed she had misheard the name. Why was that? Somehow it didn't fit the face. Even if Jackie couldn't bring forth all of her previous knowledge, it would still surface occasionally through her perception—this time of a clear mismatch between the name *Athina* and the white complexion and the blonde hair of the woman in the grey suit.

“We’re going to Square five,” Athina announced, just before she turned around and walked on. Jackie hurried after her. This time the rest of the crowd stayed behind. Jackie ended up alone with Athina in what was supposedly Square five, though to Jackie it was merely the third, from where she had started off. This one had fewer buildings than the previous two squares. There was a library on their left and next to it a small book store. On the other side of the square there was an open construction site, apparently running deep underground, as Jackie couldn’t see the bottom of it from where she stood.

As Jackie turned around, taking in her surroundings, she noticed a man standing in a large open window of the building above the passage that they had just crossed to get to this square. He was turned in Jackie’s direction, looking at her. He was mending a bow in his hands. She noticed a movement that seemed minor from this angle and distance, but then Jackie realized that the man had just cocked the bow and was aiming an arrow straight at her.

“*Look,*” Jackie urged Athina—who turned to Jackie without any sign of alarm. “There’s someone there,” Jackie pursued. There was nowhere she could duck for cover; all she could do was to hope that the archer wouldn’t go through with firing at her while she was standing next to Athina.

“The library in front of you is the heart and soul of this campus,” Athina went on with her guiding. She came off as not having a care in the world—not even over the meteor, as if she wasn’t even aware of it. Jackie realized that there could be an alternative explanation for that: perhaps Athina *knew* the truth

about the meteor, as well as would the rest of the students of the campus, in that case. Gregory Waters had known, and he had an office there. Maybe the woman in front of Jackie had some answers of her own.

“Do you not believe in the meteor?” Jackie tried. “Is there something you know that most people don’t?”

Athina stiffened at the suggestion. She raised her head in a superior way.

“And why would you assume that?” demanded the blonde woman. The sudden absence of friendliness in her demeanor struck Jackie as troubling. Athina paced around Jackie as she spoke. “Is it that you assume that I *wouldn’t* remain in control, as I am, if I knew about the disaster that awaits us? Do you *assume* that the only way this campus would remain this civilized was if we thought that the meteor wasn’t real? Well, you’re much mistaken, my dear. Much like someone else who came before you. *He* didn’t pass the rigorous test to qualify for entering into our community here on this campus. That was due to his arrogance. I will relay to you his proposition, as this *is* a place of education, though it was a disagreeable one, indeed. I only pass it on to you now as a warning, not to insinuate anything of the same nature yourself. Very well then; the brute indignantly claimed that we, on this campus, simply lacked the imagination and the initiative to take full advantage of the opportunities that had opened up to us with the end of the world on the horizon. Needless to say, he didn’t win any of us over with that argument.”

As Athina let go of the last word, a peculiar smell that Jackie had already noticed in Square five, yet paid no particular attention

to before, became overwhelming. The way Athina had circled around Jackie, the two of them had ended up moving closer to the open construction site, and Jackie now realized that the stench was coming from down there. Athina didn't seem to notice the smell, though maybe she had just gotten used to it. She looked back at Jackie in silence, as if expecting something from her.

Jackie turned to the construction site and moved closer to it in cautious steps. The smell grew stronger as she approached it. The foundation of the new building had already been set up, made out of concrete and series of metal bars—but then there was something at the bottom of the hole that didn't fit in with the rest: a red blanket, and a person lying under it.

Jackie quickly turned away, as it became clear that what she was staring at wasn't a *blanket*. And the man lying down there was evidently not alive. Jackie hurried over to Athina, who was looking back at Jackie with a smirk.

“Yes, my dear; you will need to be careful where you *step* here on this campus. You need to be most careful, indeed.”

It was as if the scene at the bottom of the foundation had branded itself into Jackie's mind. She could still picture it; there hadn't just been *one* body lying down there. Had more than one person fallen into the hole? Had *anyone* fallen into it, at all? Jackie looked up towards the man with the bow. He had disappeared. Or had he merely switched places, and was still aiming his arrow at Jackie from another spot? Jackie turned quickly in all directions, in an effort to spot him. She even turned to the library, though that building was clearly detached from the rest, and so the archer could hardly have gotten there without

crossing the square first. But perhaps this one hadn't even been the only campus archer.

"Higher education has prepared us for times like these," Athina said. "As long as you're not here to challenge us, I shall vouch for you."

"Vouch for me, where?"

"It's not just up to me, whether you are accepted into our society."

"But we didn't come here to join your ranks," Jackie hastened to clarify. "And I need to find my friend again. We came here to look for a professor."

"There is no such hierarchy around here anymore," Athina said. "There are no *professors*, no *students*—only comrades. The last standing, *civil* society—a sanctuary for the thinking brain. Come now. We have to move on with the process. You have more people to meet."

Athina turned and briskly headed back in the direction of Square four. Jackie didn't feel like standing around—not with archers lurking in windows, ready to fire at her. She followed Athina through the following square, into a corridor in between the buildings.

Beyond the square was an open field, with a crowd of people, all of whom were seemingly of the right young age to be at university, as well. Jackie stayed close to Athina. The suited woman appeared to be Jackie's best insurance for safety.

What were all these ex-students still doing there? Were they all just going to stand around until the meteor came crashing down on them? It seemed to hold true that they had managed to

stay civil and that they were set on keeping up whatever this charade was that they had going there—around their coexistence in the last days of the earth. Jackie would go along with it, for now, though eventually she hoped to be able to get to go around by herself and then try to locate the office of Professor Gregory Waters. Hopefully the entrance to his office would have his name printed on it.

More students were gathering in the area. A group of young men came walking in Jackie's direction. Wesley was among them. Jackie ran up to him, and as she reached him he embraced her with both his arms.

"I don't know what they're planning to do with us," Jackie whispered to him. "But it's possible that they only want to talk, and to make sure that we're not here to sabotage their fantasy. They might even let us walk around freely on the campus, like the rest of them."

"That's optimistic," Wesley whispered back, still keeping Jackie in his arms.

"They have weapons though," Jackie clarified. "Bows and arrows. So you have to be careful with them."

"That's not the worst they've got," Wesley said. "I ended up in what I suppose is their *arsenal*, earlier—in Square three. I saw what looked like—"

Wesley cut himself off and then looked around to make sure that he wouldn't be overheard.

"Explosives: tubes of dynamite," he whispered.

"What? How could that be? Why would a *university* have dynamite?"

Just as Jackie let go of the word, she thought back to the construction site in Square five. *That* could be where the students had gotten the dynamite. It was a disheartening revelation to Jackie. She would have preferred Wesley to have been mistaken about what he had seen. Jackie's stomach was churning at the thought of the open foundation of the new building—which would probably never be finished. It had now become a grave, a mass grave, of unfortunate souls, ex-students, who hadn't been *careful* about where they had stepped, in Athina's view.

“Break it up, you two.” There, was Athina again. “You shall be audited separately.”

Jackie looked up at Wesley. Would this be the moment that they had talked about, when they should run off together? Both of them would need to be equally determined, as neither one should hesitate, but she couldn't tell if Wesley would be thinking along the same lines.

“No,” Wesley protested. “We're staying together.”

He didn't seem to be in the mind to run off. Instead he was going to challenge Athina—which Jackie figured was a far worse strategy.

“I'm sorry, but this is a democracy now,” Athina explained. “And you're coming with me. *She's* going in *there*.” Athina pointed to the door to the building that they were standing next to. “To see someone else.”

“It's okay, Wesley,” Jackie assured him, adding in a whisper, “let's just play along.”

Only now did he release his hold on her. As Jackie backed away from Wesley, he turned to Athina. Jackie turned to the entrance and then obediently made her way towards it.

Jackie already had doubts about the decision she had just taken. Last time she had gone around by herself, she had ended up unconscious in the hands of Wesley's old friends, turned maniacs.

Paul had remained sitting on the grass where Helen had left him, while she had gone back to the campsite. Arriving back there in her company hadn't seemed like a good idea to Paul. Even if she had gotten dressed again, and so the dirt she had gotten on her back and butt weren't visible, there could easily be more subtle signs of what they had done together that the older people would pick up on. And then Paul and Helen would need to make an account of what they had been doing—in place of having sex—and if both of them were put on the spot together, it seemed more likely that they would fumble with their lies than if either of them got to face the others alone. Moreover Paul was feeling guilty. He wasn't sure whether he should be returning back to the campsite at all, now that he had betrayed the trust of the people who had invited him to stay there. However, the person who had initially suggested that he get to be with them had been Helen herself, and therefore Paul had practically *owed* this to her. Why should Helen's parents, or any of the other people from their parish, get to decide what Helen did with her own body in her last hours alive?

Paul was still trying to work out the dilemma when a drop of water landed on his face. The clouds had thickened. So it appeared that the universe wouldn't even let Paul remain lying on the ground in peace. Now he would need to seek cover under one of the trees. Unless he returned to the campsite, to see if he got invited to stay inside one of the tents; to try his luck with those people a second time.

*Ah, the rain isn't so bad*, Paul told himself. As long as it was only *water* falling from the sky, and not a meteor. Yet some old instincts kicked in, where Paul felt compelled to seek shelter—and a proper shelter at that. He stood up and walked back to the campsite. All the while the rain intensified.

Everyone over in the area of the tents was back inside them already. Some of the tents had been closed. Paul felt frustrated at himself for not having memorized which family was in which tent. Had the different families even been assigned specific tents? Which one would Helen be in? Presumably the tent belonging to her parents: Oscar and Jennifer.

As Paul stood there and imagined what it would be like to sit inside a tent with Helen and her parents at this point, he realized that he would more willingly put up with the rain than the awkwardness of that situation.

He turned around to leave the campsite.

“Paul,” he heard behind him.

He turned and saw old Alfred, sticking his head out of a grey tent.

“Come on in, you’ll get wet,” Al urged him.

Paul hesitated, but as Al gestured for him to hurry Paul walked over to the tent. At least he wasn’t likely to find Helen and her parents in that one.

That turned out to be correct; in fact inside there was only Alfred and his wife. Where were their grandkids and son-in-law, turned widower?

“You’re alone?” Paul remarked. “Just the two of you?”

“Please sit,” Eliza said. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Alfred pulled down the zipper of the tent. The sound of the rain grew stronger, with the drops coming down ever more rapidly.

Paul couldn't think of anything he could say to the other two. Neither did they to him, nor to each other from the looks of it; they just sat there in silence, without even looking at one another. What kind of a way was this to spend the end of times? What would it have been like if Paul hadn't showed up?

"Thank you for letting me in," Paul said, "but I *can't* stay here." He got up.

Both Alfred and his wife simultaneously raised their hands. "No, no," said the two of them. "Please stay."

Paul hesitated, but then sat back down.

"You two are way too kind," Paul went on. His voice was failing him; his gratitude towards the other two was becoming overpowering.

"We would never leave you alone out in the rain," said Eliza, in a caring tone. The old couple was clearly oblivious to what Paul had been doing with Helen earlier, or else they would never have been this nice to him—unless they really were *that* forgiving. But now they were also wasting their own time having Paul in there with them.

"You don't know how long you have left," Paul pointed out to them. "And you wouldn't want to spend your last time together with me in here."

"Nonsense," Alfred stubbornly objected. "Stop being so hard on yourself, Paul. You are a good man, and a good company."

How would they even know? They had hardly spent any time with him.

“You should be by yourself,” Paul went on. “Making love.”

The smile quickly vanished from Al’s face.

“Let’s not say anything we’ll regret,” he warned.

“Please,” Al’s wife implored, in a frail voice.

*Better just say nothing at all*, Paul reflected to himself. *And stay here in silence*. What did this old couple have against being intimate with each other, anyway? Had the spark gone out of their relationship so long ago? Were they desperate to have a *third wheel* in there, as a scapegoat not to get close to each other? Or was it their religion that prohibited it? If Paul had been there alone with Helen instead, he would surely have been going at it with her.

A thunder roared outside.

“A sign from God,” Paul remarked.

From the silent reaction that his comment received from the other two, they didn’t seem to have caught what he meant. Paul had merely been echoing a sentiment from Helen from earlier—that it would be a sign from God if the meteor came to earth as she was about to make out with him. Paul had had chemistry with Helen, but *nothing* with this old couple—no way of connecting with them at all, except for just by sitting there silently. And wait.

Was it all about God for them?

Paul cursed to himself over the deafening silence. It was forcing him to reflect on *everything*. At this point he couldn’t help it.

Was it *God* who didn't want the old couple to make love? Was it because of God that they had offered Paul to enter their tent?

The thoughts served to alter Paul's outlook on the old couple, and their motives: they weren't really doing any favors to Paul; it wasn't out of any genuine concern for him that they had offered him to stay with them. This way Alfred thought his chances of getting into heaven would improve. By preventing Paul from getting wet! Or by preventing Paul from seducing Helen, for the second time?

Yes, that seemed more likely.

What could old Alfred have in his past that he would be trying to make up for? He would have to be really desperate, depriving himself and the woman he loved of deriving any pleasure out of their last hours alive. This campsite sure wasn't Woodstock. But it *could* have been. And then the rain most certainly wouldn't have spoiled anyone's fun; they would just have enjoyed it—all of them.

"Why don't we play a game while we wait for—well, wait for the rain to stop?" Paul suggested, in a flash of inspiration.

"Not today," Alfred said, with a smile.

But Paul carried on regardless. "Why don't you tell us," he directed the question at the old man, "what your biggest regret is in life?"

Alfred looked back at Paul with somber disappointment in his eyes.

"The *death* of my daughter," he said, in a sharp voice. The remark was clearly intended to bring an end to the game.

“No, no; not that,” Paul clarified. “Something you’ve *done*, yourself. Something that you wished that you *hadn’t*.”

Paul turned to Eliza.

“Or you,” he said. “What’s *your* biggest regret?”

“There will be a time and place for that conversation,” Al responded, for both of them. “But it’s not now.”

“I *knew* it,” Paul exclaimed, triumphantly. “You’re thinking about the conversation you’re going to have at the gates of heaven, aren’t you?”

Both of the others seemed taken aback by the suggestion, as if that were a topic they were even less willing to discuss.

“Well, what if I am?” the old man responded defiantly.

Paul shook his head. “*This* is no way to live. Especially not now-”

He stopped himself from going on, as he thought he had heard the tone of Helen’s voice outside, through the raindrops beating on the tent. Paul waited and listened. It *was* her voice, getting louder—not just as she was getting closer to this tent, but she seemed to be purposefully raising her voice. She was having a heated argument with someone. Now Paul heard a man’s voice, shouting back at her.

Paul turned to Alfred. The old man seemed to read something into Paul’s expression.

“Let’s not get involved,” Alfred warned him.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that,” Paul explained. “This may already have something to do with me.” He got up. “Thanks for everything, and good luck at the gates of heaven.”

He unzipped the entrance to the tent and stepped outside.

It was still raining hard. Paul immediately became soaked as he stepped out of the tent. He saw Helen, facing her brother; she was shouting at him. The other tents were now open, with their residents poking their heads out.

“*She’s right,*” Paul called to Helen’s brother, in his strides, now making his way towards them. “And you should back off,” he added.

“Get back to your tent,” Helen’s brother warned.

“I don’t have a tent,” Paul responded.

Helen turned to him.

“*Just get the fuck out of here, asshole! You don’t even know what this is about!*”

The comment sufficed to put Paul off. If Helen didn’t care for him to intervene, then who was he doing it for?

But Paul had lost his chance to retreat, as Helen’s brother now turned to him, and before Paul could realize what was coming next, the brother had landed a punch across the left side of his face. Paul lost his balance and collapsed on the muddy ground.

The rain coming down got into his eyes. Paul only had a hazy view of the people who were gathering around him—not just Helen and her brother, but the others as well; they had come out of their tents for this. They didn’t mind the rain anymore. It didn’t look as if any of them had come out to help Paul.

Beyond the door that Jackie had been sent through was a canteen, with four long rows of tables, broken by every two for passage. The lunchroom was being kept orderly, with the tables and chairs set up for service. Students were sitting at the tables, as if they were waiting to be served. Jackie noticed that some of them had paint on their faces and even in their hair, much like the bare-chested boy she had met down in Square three. More were bare-chested in the canteen, however that seemed to be as far as disorderly behavior would go in there. Even though Jackie realized that she should be taking comfort in that fact—especially considering all the madness she had already witnessed and heard about from Wesley—there was still something eerie about just how separate the university campus seemed to be from the outside world, as if that somehow made these students *less* predictable. Jackie reflected that Athina’s reaction to her suggestion earlier, that perhaps the latter didn’t believe that the meteor was real, had come off as genuine, with the blonde woman seemingly getting upset by the mere idea of it. The rest of the students wouldn’t know anything more than Athina did, and so the explanation for the tranquility on campus wouldn’t be that the students had been let in on the secret of the meteor, unlike Jackie. What else could their reason be?

Given how unfazed the students were by the situation, Jackie reflected that she might have a hope of sliding past them, that they would pay no attention to her at all, leaving her free to roam around campus, free to track down the office of Professor

Gregory Waters. Even if Athina had warned Jackie that it would be dangerous for her to go around by herself, now at least one of the campus archers had seen the two of them together and so Jackie would at least be safe from him.

A door at the other side of the lunchroom seemed to lead to a corridor that went further into the building. Jackie felt like making her way over there to begin her search for the office.

“What’s your name?” came a shout from the crowd.

One of the students got up from the table and took a position facing her. The others had turned to her as well, though they stayed in their seats and watched.

“I’m Jackie.”

“And I am Hawthorn,” the standing student replied.

He was skinny, with wavy blonde hair. Smartly dressed, in a black suit and a white shirt, Hawthorne looked more presentable than any of the other students Jackie had come across, with the sole exception of Athina.

“You are new to this campus, I understand?”

“We’re just visiting,” Jackie clarified. Was this already the *auditing* that Athina had mentioned earlier?

“*Hah!* No one’s just *visiting* anymore,” Hawthorne retorted mockingly. He turned to his audience—the students, who seemed to be hanging on to his every word. “Many have lost their minds since the discovery of the comet,” Hawthorne went on. “But for us, the educated and the cultured, we have a higher purpose in mind. Are *you* one of us?” The question was directed at Jackie.

If this particular student truly held a position of authority over the rest of them, Jackie could see what it was based on—

something she hadn't picked up on in Athina: the theatrics. This boy spoke with delivery as if he was performing on stage, annunciating every word in a clear, robust voice. This way he made a spectacle out of their conversation. Perhaps one's status on this campus would be wholly determined by one's ability to put on a performance like that, and hence, to win them over, Jackie would need to pull off something theatrical herself—though the thought merely made her heart sink.

“I came here to have a meeting with a professor,” Jackie called out. “He had a message to give to me.”

If anyone in there already knew about Waters, perhaps this would suffice for them to catch what she was alluding to.

“Intriguing,” Hawthorne replied approvingly. “But which matters did you intend to discuss with said professor?”

Jackie thought back to the time when she had discovered the note from Waters, kept in between pages he had been returning to her.

“He meant to give me some papers,” Jackie called out, in an effort to be heard by everyone in there. She preferred them where they were, in their seats, and so she didn't want to encourage any of them to get up and move closer to her, if only to hear her better.

“But now that you know that the professor isn't here,” said Hawthorne, “what do you intend to do?”

Jackie stopped herself from responding spontaneously, on a hunch that she should be cautious not to reveal the entirety of her plans to the students—that she wished to look for the professor's office—not to show them all of her cards, just yet. For now, she

mostly wanted to be reunited with Wesley, anyway. But what did Hawthorne want from her? And how could she negotiate with him?

“It will make an interesting story,” Jackie tried. “But it would be incomplete at this point. Why not let me run along, by myself—or, with my friend, preferably. And then, when I come back I’ll tell you all of it. I’ll *perform* it for you. It will be worth it. But until then, this conversation a waste of everyone’s time.”

“I’m afraid you’re asking the impossible,” Hawthorne retorted. “If you had come here last month it wouldn’t have been a problem, but, you see, now everything has changed.”

It wasn’t going to be as simple as she had hoped, yet Jackie couldn’t abandon her attempt to try and win him over.

“Could I speak to Hawthorne from last month then?”

Hawthorne’s face broke into a smile.

“A tall order, that. Could I then speak to Jackie from ten years ago?”

“Sure.”

“How old would you have been back then, I wonder. About twelve, or thirteen?”

“I don’t know,” Jackie admitted.

“In any case you must have been in the early days of your puberty. Had just started to feel something for the boys, hadn’t you? Weren’t you confused? Temperamental, maybe?”

It dawned on Jackie that by accepting the challenge, she had been promising far more than she could deliver; even going back one *month* would have been an impossible feat for her.

“It would make no difference,” Hawthorne went on with his performance. “You’re still the *same* as you were back then. You have not undergone any serious transformation; I can tell that much. While *we*, here, have evolved in a matter of a month. So, to answer your question then: *no*, you cannot converse with the Hawthorne of last month, for that Hawthorne no longer exists.”

Jackie reflected that perhaps it wasn’t Hawthorne that she had to win over, but the rest of the students in the lunchroom. She turned away from the blonde man, to make her remarks to the others.

“Who here wishes to come with me?” she asked. “Get up, so I can see you.”

If anyone actually ended up following her, that would be the opposite of what she had wanted, yet Jackie figured that this way she would be throwing them off and perhaps she would manage to keep her true intentions hidden to them.

Only a single student got up, in the corner of the lunchroom—at first. Noticing it, another one stood up, and then two more. Eventually most of the students were standing. Had Jackie succeeded? Would this intimidate Hawthorne into letting her move on?

“So you *have* come here to challenge me,” he shouted back at her. “Very well then. Eighty lashes!” He pointed at Jackie. “On her bare ass!”

The vacant expression that all the other students had shared in common, even as they were standing up to join Jackie, now collectively turned to that of amazement and delight. Some of the boys couldn’t contain their excitement, and shouted out in

celebration, as if they had been waiting for something like this to happen, all along.

Jackie quickly turned around, but the entrance she had come in through was already blocked by a student. She turned in the other direction and sprinted to the other side of the canteen, past the students who had stood up earlier. She reached the entrance, and ran on into the corridor beyond it.

She could hear them coming after her. Jackie knew she had no hope of outrunning them. Her only chance of getting away was if she were able to hide from them.

Jackie turned into the next corridor. This one had a series of doors on both sides, but all of them were closed and would possibly be locked. She couldn't allow herself time to stop and check even a single one. Instead she sprinted on through the hallway, then down a flight of stairs. She could hear the students coming after her. And *they* would probably hear her; they would be able to reach her by following the sound she was making with her feet. Nevertheless Jackie sprinted on through the next corridor. She ran on through an open door.

She had entered a computer lab. At the other end of it there was an open door. Through that doorway she could see a brighter area—which probably meant that there would be an exit out of the building there.

Jackie hurried on through the computer lab and, sure enough, on the other side of it there was a door leading outside. Into one of the squares, as it was. And the square looked deserted through the window of the door.

Jackie stopped to listen. She couldn't hear the running footsteps of the others anymore. Perhaps she had managed to lose them already. And now she had a clear passage out into the open. She might even be able to get out of the campus, and get away from the university. But then what about Wesley? Could she leave him there? She was hardly in a position to save him, anyway.

Jackie took in the scene outside. The coast seemed to be clear. She knew which way to go, to get back to the car, assuming it was still in its place. But then the car keys were with Wesley. The two of them would always have to meet back at the car. Whichever one of them got there first would have to wait for the other to escape as well.

She heard someone behind her. Jackie turned around. There was no one there. It had merely been an echo, travelling through the hallways.

As she turned back she noticed a sign on the wall behind her. It had information on the departments on each floor of the building. One line particularly caught her attention.

*Third floor.*

*Department of Social Science.*

*Anthropology*, Jackie thought. The office of Gregory Waters should be in the department of social science. Did she now have his office within reach?

Instead of continuing to run, Jackie now tiptoed, as quietly as she could, over to the flight of stairs going up. As she reached it she proceeded the same way up the steps, going as quietly as

possible. Jackie froze as she heard the commotion of the running crowd coming after her. They were getting closer. Soon they would have reached her. Jackie slipped off her shoes, and kept them in her hands as she hurried on up the stairs. This way they surely wouldn't be able to hear her. Yet she could still hear them. It sounded as if they had reached the computer lab.

*"She got outside,"* one of them shouted.

Jackie couldn't allow herself to stay still and go on listening. She hurried up the steps. She reached the first floor, and then ran up the next flight of stairs, ending up on the second floor. She ran on, to the third floor, where she ended up next to a tall window, overlooking the square below. Jackie ducked for cover and then moved back towards the window, just close enough to see what was going on down in the square. She could see a couple of the people who were coming after her.

Jackie moved away from the window and turned around. She was looking into a corridor of doors to offices. But before that corridor there was a closed door. Jackie reached for the handle. The door came open. She could hear commotion downstairs; a group of students was getting back into the building. And this time they came running up the stairs. Jackie slipped into the corridor and closed the door behind her. She put her shoes back on, figuring that if she were spotted she would need to take flight; in that case she would need to have her shoes on already. She could hear them out in the hallway, getting closer.

In the middle of the corridor she was in there was a large, freestanding printer by the wall. Jackie hurried over to it. She crouched behind it.

She could hear them outside the corridor now, on the other side of the door.

“*Should we go in there?*”

They opened the door. Jackie held her breath.

“Could be inside one of those offices.”

“We’ll check it later, if we don’t find her.”

She heard the two men run away and then the door closing by itself.

Jackie still couldn’t get herself to abandon her cover.

How long would it be until they came back? From what she had heard, the boys would be coming back, later. She wouldn’t have much time to look for the office. Jackie jumped up and proceeded to look at the name on every door, as soon as she got close enough. She needed to move on as quickly as possible.

The *negative space*, she thought; she could identify the area surrounding the letters: W-a-t-e-r-s. It could be quicker than always reading the words themselves. And so she dismissed the offices, one after the other.

There was commotion again, out in the connected corridor.

Jackie ducked for cover. She crawled around the corner, where the corridor split into two. Jackie got back up and looked at the names in the windows of the offices. How could it ever occur to the people coming after her that she had stuck around to look for an office? Wasn’t Jackie already in the clear? The way she saw it she had no choice; she *had* to first find the office of the professor and look for anything in there that could help her figure out what was going on. Then she needed to find Wesley. Or, alternatively she could get to the car by herself and then wait

there, in hope that he would reach it as well. Perhaps she would have been better off doing that in the first place. She couldn't allow herself to get caught. Even if what Hawthorne had said they would do to her didn't sound as if it would be lethal, there was no telling where they would take it from there.

*Gregory Waters.*

His name was on the door in front of her. Jackie felt her heart skip a beat. She looked into the office through the window of the door. It appeared much the same as all the others. From up close she noticed that the door wasn't closed, but merely ajar. Jackie slipped into the office and closed the door properly behind her.

She didn't dare turn on the light, or even open the blinds any further than they were already open. Thankfully the sun was still high up in the sky and even if the day was slightly overcast, enough light was making its way through the blinds for Jackie to see well enough in there.

She turned to the desk, and skimmed around for pieces of papers with handwriting on them. The whole office was in disarray, with open textbooks and notebooks lying around.

Jackie picked up every book that lay open on the desk, one after the other, first looking at the front cover, while keeping her fingers in between the pages where the books had been left open. All the books were on anthropology. Some lines were highlighted, but none of them appeared to be anything that could possibly relate to what Jackie was hoping to find. She cleared the desk by gathering all the textbooks and throwing them on the floor. The

notebooks were what she had to focus on. There were three of them, all full of the professor's scribbles, as she discovered. Jackie quickly flipped through the pages. All she could see were notes that seemed to refer to pages in books: page numbers and titles. Nothing that looked like a hidden message for her.

There was *nothing* in there, at all.

Jackie had risked her life for this. She probably wouldn't be able to make it back at this point.

The professor had a desktop computer in his office. Jackie turned to it and turned it on.

She needed a password to log on.

Jackie skimmed around the desk. Did he have anything written anywhere that could be a password?

She tried writing his name.

It didn't work.

She tried variations of it, with random capital letters.

The computer still wouldn't log on—went on asking for that password.

Jackie tried something else.

*The meteor is a scam*

No luck.

Jackie turned the screen off, realizing suddenly that she shouldn't be attracting attention to this office, if the others came back. She had no hope of guessing the password anyway.

She turned back to the desk. Which one of the notebooks could have any information that could be useful for her? The paper she had received from the professor back at her own university hadn't struck her as anything meaningful, at the time.

Under one of the notebooks there was a newspaper clipping. Jackie picked it up.

*Mixed views on honorary price for anthropological achievement.*

There was a picture of a man. Under, it read: Prof. Gregory Waters honored for his work on the Rohndu tribe last decade, a controversial achievement, it now seems.

So this was what he looked like. Square jaws, dark features, heavy eyebrows and bushy sideburns. He was probably in his fifties at the time that the picture was taken. Jackie folded the clipping and put it in her pocket.

She stood up from the desk and turned to the book case. Every shelf was full of books. With nothing to go on, Jackie picked out books at random to skim through. Though there could be hidden messages inside any of them, much like the note in between Jackie's papers, that much applied for every single book in the office. It would take Jackie the whole afternoon to search through all of them.

And she had no time left at all. Now she heard commotion in the corridor outside. They were back to look for her in the offices. More of them than before, judging from the sound of the footsteps.

*"She must be inside somewhere."*

Jackie dived down to the floor and went under the desk. There she could stay hidden behind a cover running down the side of it, creating something like a thin divider, presumably to protect the modesty of whoever was sitting at the desk. Jackie remained curled up with her back pressed against the divider. She struggled

to hold her breath. She couldn't hear the others shouting outside anymore. Yet they were still *there*. They were going around quietly now, looking inside the offices. Were they outside the right one now? She probably wouldn't hear anything, even if they were. Jackie didn't dare to move.

There was something under the desk that she hadn't noticed before. A leather bag, with long handles that rested like tentacles on the floor. Though it was clear to Jackie that she needed to make a fast exit out of the office, as soon as the coast would be clear, she felt that she couldn't leave before going through the contents of this last item in there.

Jackie hesitantly turned, to see if anyone was standing on the other side of the door. She caught only a brief glance at the window before turning back, with her heart racing. There was no one there, for the time being. Jackie reached for the bag and dragged it over to her.

Inside it there were more books still. And a notebook, but there was also something else, something of a completely different shape, she felt as she ran her fingers through the bottom of the bag. She pulled it out. A tube of toothpaste.

No help there. Jackie placed it on the floor and went on digging through the remaining contents of the bag. There had been something else there, next to the toothpaste. Something in a carton. Jackie now fished it out of the bag. The wrappings of a toothbrush, with the toothbrush still inside it, though the package had already been torn open.

Jackie felt her eyes turn watery with her frustration.

Then her heart seemed to skip a beat.

She felt shivers.

These were items that the professor *needed*. He must have meant to bring this bag with him the next time he left campus. Perhaps he was going to come back for it, or he had had to leave in a hurry without it. So the books in this bag were more likely to contain some important messages inside them. Going through them would give Jackie something to do while she hid under the desk.

But she wouldn't have enough time. Eventually the students would start scanning each office more thoroughly. Jackie had to switch hiding places. But then she could bring the bag with her.

She hadn't heard anything outside for a while.

Jackie slowly crawled out from under the desk. There was still no one outside the entrance to the office. Jackie stayed ducked as she approached the door. She reached for the handle and opened it, as slowly and as quietly as she could.

She poked her head out into the corridor. There was no one to be seen.

Jackie hurried back the way she had come before.

Now she could hear them. Running through the corridors and shouting. At least those whom she now heard were far away enough to give her a decent head-start. And it wouldn't matter if they heard her at this point, as they wouldn't be able to distinguish the sound of her footsteps from the ones of each other.

Jackie ran back, through the corridor, then down the flight of stairs where she had gone up earlier. She made it all the way down to the ground floor, without running into anyone. She

hurried out the main door, into the square, where she had considered going before.

She reached a stone column, and there she stopped, staying covered while looking around and catching her breath.

The square was still empty. Preferably she would need to get to a hiding place where they had looked for her already and weren't likely to return to it straight away. But she couldn't leave without Wesley. Jackie needed to stay on campus and remain undetected until she found him.

On one side of the square were the steps leading up to the one above, Square four, which Jackie couldn't see from where she was standing. But now there was a group of five people making their way down the steps. Jackie was looking directly at them. She quickly moved around the column. For now she was covered, but they could easily have seen her before, just as she had gotten a clear look at them.

"This is such a waste of time," a woman's voice echoed through the square.

A man spoke in a lower voice, so much so that Jackie couldn't catch what he said.

"We haven't had any real enemies around here since we took care of that North Tower crowd."

"Yes. I think it's going to be well worth it when we all get together and see justice being done."

"It will be fucking amazing."

They were getting closer to her. Eventually they would see her, unless Jackie managed to move around the column exactly as they got close enough. But that was too great of a chance for her

to take. If she sprinted away now, into the building that was in front of her, on the other side of the square—where she hadn't been before—she might have a better chance of getting away from this group.

Jackie didn't dwell on the thought. Keeping Gregory Waters' leather bag close to her stomach, she used her heel to push herself away from the column, like an athlete, and sprinted in the direction of the door to the building. The students didn't notice her immediately as she ran. Jackie had reached the door when she heard them shouting in unison.

*“Hey!”*

Jackie tore open the door and ran inside.

She ran straight into someone, tripping her.

She tried to get up fast, but the man she had had in impact with reached out to grab her with both hands. She stirred and was able to break free from him, but then lost her balance and almost fell to the floor. The man stepped forward and pushed Jackie, and this time she fell for real. She got up and went back through the front door. The people outside had gathered by the entrance. The man behind Jackie tripped her again, grabbing her by the ankles. She ended up flat on the stone tiles. Before she had had a chance to get back up the man was lying on top of her. He hit the back of her head, so that her chin hit the ground. With that she had to stop squirming under him. Jackie was completely blocked by his weight.

He hit her again, this time in the back. Then he fixed himself on top of her again, so that she couldn't move—could hardly even breathe. She was looking at the feet of people who were gathering

in the square, fast; they were cheering, some of them galloping on their way over there.

Jackie felt the face of the man who was on top of her now coming all the way up to her.

“Do you know who gets to flog you?” he asked excitedly. “The one who *caught* you!” He laughed straight into her ear. It was deafening.

But Jackie could only think about one thing.

*Don't pass out now.*

*Please don't pass out.*

*If you pass out now, you're dead.*

TO BE CONTINUED.

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