

## **PART EIGHT**

### **THE COMEDY OF THE COMMONS**

THEIR TRAY

Art is not truth. Art is a lie that enables us to realize the truth.  
said Picasso

## a) Mutt and Jeff

don't like to see you wielding a hammer. It scares me."

"You are easily scared. Why, what?"

"You are not a hammer kind of guy. I'm not sure who you will injure first, me or you."

"Come on. It's not a complex skill. It's like typing. It's like typing with a big thing that whaps the keyboard for you. In fact I'm thinking I may start typing with a hammer."

"With two hammers, one for each hand."

"Two for each hand, like a xylophone player. I will type like Lionel Hampton playing the xylophone."

"Wasn't it a vibraphone?"

"Not sure. Hand me that bag of nails."

Mutt hands over the bag and contemplates his partner hefting hammer and nails. With the farm floor's tall arches so hugely open to the air, it looks like Bartleby the scrivener has exchanged his quill for a riveting gun from the heroic age of high-rise construction. Although currently they are assembling long planter boxes. Eventually they will trundle hods of soil to these boxes rather than hods of cement. Otherwise they're like Rosie the Riveter. Rosen the Riveter. Roosevelt the Riveter, maybe that's where they got the name Rosie, sure.

"Or you could type with your forehead, like archy the cockroach," Mutt says.

"*Toujours gai*, my friend. I would enjoy that."

"It was mehtabel the cat who said *toujours gai*."

"I know that. I'm the one who made you read that book."

"I somewhat liked it, I have to admit."

"I find that very encouraging."

"It was funny to see how little New York changes through the centuries."

"So true. If you disregard it being underwater and storm-racked."

"As of course one should. Character remains despite one's circumstances. As mehitabel always said."

It's a sunny day, some clouds over Jersey. Vlade appears out of the service elevator, pushing a wheelbarrow of black dirt. Idelba has been using her gear to salvage some of their farm's soil from its resting place on the bottom of the canal between the Met and the North building. A few more people unknown to Mutt and Jeff follow with more wheelbarrows. Jeff says, "Here, this box is ready."

Vlade helps his team fill the new box with soil. "Idelba says she can pull up some good mud to mix with our compost. We should be okay for soil."

"You'll need seeds," Mutt points out.

"Sure, but the seed bank is ready to provide. They want us to try out some new hybrids they've got. And some new heirlooms."

"New heirlooms?"

"They rustled them up somewhere. The call has gone out. Anyway, we'll be okay. Back in business in time to get a late-fall crop, anyway."

"What about our hotello?"

"What, isn't that up yet? You can put that up in an hour. That's the point of those things. It's in the storage closet back of the elevators."

"We didn't know where it was," Mutt confesses.

"Sorry, I should have told you. Where are you staying now?"

"Nowhere."

"In the common room."

"Oh hell, let's get you up here. I need you here to serve as night watchmen. And you need your place."

Vlade is as good as his word, so when the current load of dirt is shoveled into the new planter boxes, he goes to the storage room and pulls out what looks like an oversized suitcase. This, along with a trunk containing all their bathroom fixtures, is their hotello, packed to move. All its parts are off the shelf, modular, easy to assemble. Plastic everything, including the air mattresses on cots, the walls that look like thick opaque shower curtains, because they are; the chem toilet; the light fixtures that are LED strings, and often strung on the structural elements, which resemble PVC tubing, now spangled as with Christmas lights. Festive in the dark.

Vlade takes a look around and declares the place rebuilt. It has indeed taken an hour.

"It seems kind of breezy up here now," Jeff remarks to him.

"It was always breezy up here."

"But now I'm noticing it more. After the hurricane, I guess."

"Sure," says Vlade. "We feel it now."

"What are you going to do about that, by the way? I mean next time there's a big storm. In terms of protecting this floor."

"I don't know. I'm still thinking it over. I think the whole city is, in terms of windows and how to deal. I don't know if there's any great solution, if we're going to get storms like that one. I'm hoping that was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. It's gonna take years to rebuild."

Mutt and Jeff nod.

"Meanwhile, if you don't like living out here anymore, you should get on the list for a regular bed inside. Or maybe you can take Charlotte's room."

"Her so-called room has walls thinner than ours."

"Well you might be able to be her room sitter if you want, if she wins this election and has to go to D.C."

"Would she really do that?"

"I imagine she'd commute as much as possible, but I don't know. If you're in Congress, don't you have to be there sometimes?"

Mutt and Jeff shrug.

"I can't believe she wants to do it," Mutt says.

"I don't think she does. She's just mad right now."

"Somebody's got to do it," Jeff pontificates.

"We can be her finance ministers without portfolio."

"I want a portfolio."

"Then you'd have to go with her to D.C."

"Okay, not. But I always wanted a portfolio."

"Well, she is going to need some finance advice. Because the shirt is hitting the fan."

"It's working," Jeff says. "I knew it would. It's like that Franklin says, the only problem is if it works so well it wipes out civilization. Aside from that it's working fine."

"Banks must be freaking."

"Totally. The line between cash and not-cash has abruptly moved. Like your cash in hand is cash now. Because people are definitely not paying their rents and mortgages."

"And student loans?" Murt inquires.

"They never paid those. So now there's nothing at the bottom of the house of cards. The dominoes are falling."

"The falling dominoes are knocking over the house of cards?"

"Exactly. The whole shithouse is coming down."

"Good. And look, meanwhile we have our little home back!"

"I know. It's good." Jeff stands in the open doorway of it, looking south at Wall Street. "If only everyone realized all you need is a hotello."

Murt moves past him and stops by the south railing. "The view helps."

"It does. It's a nice view."

"I love this city."

"It's not bad. Especially from the thirtieth floor. Here, I'm going to build another planer box."

"Watch your thumbs." Murt regards Jeff moving slabs of wood into position on a long worktable. "You're a carpenter now, my friend. Have you noticed that we've gone from being coders to being farmers? It's like one of those dreadful back-to-the-land fantasies you kept giving me. Everyone goes Amish and all's right with the world. Unreadable horseshit, I'm sorry to say."

Jeff snorts as he lines up two slabs. "Hold this sucker in place while I nail it."

"No way."

Jeff shrugs and tries to do it himself. "The idiocy of village life, isn't that what Marx called it? The idiocy of rural life? Something like that."

"And here we are."

"Come on, I need a hand here. And we're at Twenty-third and Madison in New York City, on the thirtieth floor of a grand old skyscraper, so it's not as rural as you're saying."

"And you like hammering nails."

"I do," Jeff admits. "It's like hitting the head of your worst enemy, over and over. And you drive them right into a fucking block of wood! You can feel them go! It's very satisfying. So get over here and help hold this piece in place."

"We call it a vise, my friend. Two vises and you're set."

"Two vises don't make a virtue. Come hold this!"

"Hold it yourself! Practice your William Morris craft skills, your Emersonian self-reliance!"

"Fuck self-reliance. Emerson was a fool."

"You're the one who made me read him," objects Murt.

"He's a holy fool, and you should read him. But he couldn't string two thoughts together if his life depended on it. He's the greatest fortune cookie writer in American literature." Jeff snorts with amusement. "Self-reliance my ass. We're fucking monkeys. It's always about teamwork."

"That would make three very good fortune cookie fortunes. Maybe we could start a company."

"Teamwork, baby. You do the work and I'll join the team. Come hold this slab of wood here!"

"All right already. But then you owe me."

"A dime."

"A dollar."

"A call option on ten zillion dollars."

"Deal."

## b) Stefan and Roberto

In this situation, what one can say, as Giambattista Vico seems to have been one of the first to do, is that while nature is meaningless, history has a meaning; even if there is no meaning, the project and the future produce it, on the individual as well as the collective basis. The great collective project has a meaning and it is that of utopia. But the problem of utopia, of collective meaning, is to find an individual meaning.

—Fredric Jameson, *An American Utopia*

It took about a week for Stefan and Roberto to eat their way back to weight, and after that Roberto got restless and began to plot their next move. Whatever this project turned out to be, it was going to be complicated by the fact that now they had about a dozen adults in the Met paying attention to them and bringing up the foster parent thing, the guardian thing, the paper thing, the gold thing, trying to make them “wards of the co-op,” as Charlotte put it at one point when they refused all supervision. Neither of them liked any of these ideas, and they agreed it was getting dangerous to speak openly to anyone but Mr. Hexter, who had his own ideas about what they should do, and described himself as being, in relation to them, avuncular, meaning “unclelike” in Latin. Seemed to them that it must be a cool language to have a specific word for being unclelike, as uncles were nothing as far as they could tell. They were happy to let him take on the role on that basis.

He was still trying to teach them to read. It wasn't much harder than understanding his maps. Maps were great; they were pictures of places from a bird's-eye view, easy to comprehend. Mr. Hexter wanted Amelia Black to give them a ride so that they would be able to see how much the land looked like the map of it when you were up at the bird's level. They were agreeable to that, in fact it sounded great. But even without that, the principle of maps was obvious and they got it. And it had been the same with written words, which were like pictures of the spoken words, in that each letter was the picture of one or two sounds, and once you had memorized those, you could sound out any word and know what you were reading. That too had been easy. It had turned out to be way easier than they had thought it was going to be. It would have been even easier if English spelling were less stupid, but whatever.

“I wonder if all of school would have been this easy?” Stefan said.

"You can still find out," Mr. Hexter said. "But I don't recommend it. You guys are too quick for school. You might die of boredom and get in trouble, and you're already in enough trouble as it is."

"What do you mean, we're not in trouble?"

But it was true that Franklin and Vlade and Charlotte had melted their gold coins and were taking care of the money the gold had been bought for. And Franklin in particular was insistent that from now on when they went out to do things, they had to take their wristpad with them, always, no exceptions.

"In fact," he said, "I think that idea of locking ankle beepers on you like they do with people under house arrest is a good idea. I bet Inspector Gen would bring home a couple for us. That way you wouldn't accidentally forget and go out and get yourself killed without us knowing how you did it."

"No to that," Roberto said. "We are free citizens of the republic!"

"You have no idea whether you are or not. No birth certificates, right? No last names, for God's sake. In fact, Roberto, how did you get any name at all, being orphaned at birth and self-raised from out of a lobster trap?" Roberto got his stubborn look. "I am Roberto New York, of the house of New York. The dockmaster called me little robber, so I figured my name was Robber, and then later a guy told me about Roberto Clemente. So I decided I was Roberto."

"And you were how old at this point?"

"I was three years old."

Franklin shook his head. "Remarkable. And you, Stefan?"

"I am Stefan Melville de Madison."

"You're wards of the building. Or maybe Lame Ass. Charlotte made that your legal status. So if you want to go out, at least take that wristpad."

"All right already," Stefan conceded. "We can always zap it later," he explained to Roberto, forestalling Roberto's expostulations.

"For now, I'll go out with them," Mr. Hexter said. "We're going to go out and see how things are looking since the storm."

"We're going to go muskrat hunting!"

Franklin nodded at this. "Good. Mr. Hexter will be your electronic bracelet."

"I am indeed powerfully attached to my friends," the old man said, shaking his head as if it were a bad habit.

"Besides, what about our gold," Roberto demanded. "Here you are trying to lock us down and you're keeping our own gold away from us."

"No no," Franklin said. "Your gold is yours. What's left of it anyway. We've got it in Vlade's safe so you don't make a big necklace out of it and then go swimming while you're wearing it. It's doing fine. More than fine. You know that. The Indian central bank loves you. And I used some of what they paid you to short housing, so now you are rich. By the time I'm done you'll be about fifty times richer than you were with the gold. The only remaining question is whether anyone will be left standing to pay you."

"Cool."

"I want a gold doubloon to pierce and put around my neck on a necklace."

"I think they're guineas, and haven't you heard those stories of guys getting beheaded by thieves going after their gold necklaces?"

"No." The boys looked a little thoughtful at this. "Does that really happen?"

"Sure, this is New York, remember?"

"Okay, well, I still want one of the coins, for in my pocket."

"That seems fair. As long as you're wristpadded, so we can recover your body."

"Deal."

Then it was back to singing *a b c d e f g, h i j k et cetera*. At this point they sang it whenever they wanted to drive Mr. Hexter to something more interesting than reading.

Today, with Franklin Garr off to join the Cloisterclusterfuck, as he called it, they used the song to convince Mr. H to agree to a cruise around the city.

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Their boat was no worse for wear, and they pattered about the canals of the neighborhood checking things out. The hurricane had ripped off all the leaves, so the terraces and rooftops looked bare, and many a canal

was still clogged with debris. But they were able to get through most of them, and city crews were out in force working on the cleanup. There was a dank vegetable jungly smell in the air, and many people on the water were wearing white face masks. Mr. Hexter snorted at this. "Little do they know they're depriving themselves of needed nutrients and helpful micro-biome teammates."

They found that the most common arboreal survivors of the wind's onslaught had been potted trees, which had presumably been knocked on their sides and remained prone through the storm, and now only had to be lifted upright to restore some green to the scene. They looked battered but unbowed; they were like the city itself, Mr. Hexter declared.

Up in the intertidal things were truly squalid. Around Fiftieth the high water mark of the storm surge was obvious, an irregular wall of junk steaming in the criminal humidity. Mr. Hexter said it looked like the barricades of *Les Misérables*: windows intact in their frames, shutters, chairs, boat hulls, trash cans, pallets, boxes, cans, and many branches, or even trees entire, roots and all. This long barrier reef complicated getting from lower Manhattan onto dry land, and it was interesting to see the city workers concentrate on certain avenue canals to establish functioning floater docks: Tenth, Sixth, Fifth, Lex.

Everywhere people were out and about, either looking for things or just living their summer lives. Refugee residents, hanging out all ragged. It was like everyone had been turned into Huck and Pap, or like the whole city had turned into the Street of Fundy on a fast ebb.

"Why didn't they take over the uptown towers?" Stefan asked the old man.

"They tried and it didn't work."

"So what?" Roberto said. "That was only one night! What if they kept trying every day?"

"It doesn't occur to them."

"Why not?"

"They call it hegemony."

"Not another word!"

Hexter laughed at that. "Yes another word. The war of words! Greek in this case, I think."

"Hedge money? Like Franklin Garr?"

"No, he-ge-mony. Means, hmm... means the agreement of people to being dominated, without guns having to be pointed in your face all the time. Even if you're treated badly. You just go along with it."

"But that's stupid."

"Well, we're social animals, I guess you'd have to say."

"So we're all stupid, you're saying. We're like—"

"We're like zombies!"

Hexter laughed. "That's how I always used to think of it. Did you ever see *Vampires Versus Zombies*? No, you didn't. A very great movie. The vampires fly around sucking the blood of working people. That's the best blood to suck. When the workers are drained they turn into zombies, so the vampires fly somewhere else and drop in on a new population, leaving behind the zombies, who stagger around dead at that point."

"So that would be their he-ge-mony," Roberto said carefully.

"You are so good. So yeah, more and more people get their blood sucked and turn into zombies, and then when they're almost all zombies—"

"All but one!"

"All but two."

"Right, you two. But then the zombies decide it's time to revolt."

"About time!"

"Better late than never."

"Exactly. So the zombies all slouch off toward the vampire castle, determined to invade. But they're very slow. At first the vampires just laugh. But there's no new blood for them to suck either, so the vampires are slowing down too. Eventually the whole movie is in slow motion, it's hilarious. The zombies keep falling apart when they hit somebody, and the vampires can only bite. They're pretty weak on both sides. As usual the scene goes on too long. But finally the zombies just kind of crush the vampires under the weight of their detached limbs. The end."

"I want to see that."

"Me too!"

"Me too," Hexter said.

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As they motored about they kept an eye peeled for wildlife, muskrats in particular, but anything would do. Hexter said, "The Indians figured that

bears were the big brothers of beavers, and beavers were the big brothers of muskrats. The bigger ones protected the littler ones, I guess. Or the bigger ones never ate the littler ones."

"What about otters?"

"Oh no, otters are vicious killers. Playful but vicious."

"It's hard to understand how they could kill anything, their mouths are so small."

"It's a matter of attitude, I guess. Hey look, there's a nest up on that cornice. Peregrine falcon, it looks like. They're so cool."

"They drop like rocks!"

"Like arrows shot down. I know. So, this is as close to a swamp as we've got now, this part of the intertidal at Fifty-fifth and Madison. That's because it was a swamp, back before the city was here. This was the Kill of Schepmoes, I think. I call it the Two Stooges Swamp. Now it's kind of come back. You see those willows and alders growing right out of the ground. And the old spring is back to springing."

"No way."

"Way. It never stopped. It drains the southeast corner of Central Park. It's the old watershed, coming back. Which is what gives the beavers in Central Park their chance. Same up at the northeast end of the park. The beavers chew down the alder and willows—"

"With their teeth!"

"That's right, they are way tougher than vampires, dentally speaking. They chew down entire trees, and weave the trees and branches together until they have a beaver dam, which raises the water some, and slows it down. Then they can build beaver lodges, where you swim up under them to get inside, and when you go high enough inside them it's dry."

"That's very cool."

"It is. And it also makes homes for muskrats, who move into abandoned beaver lodges, or make their own using old beaver cuttings, mostly. So along with beaver, you get all the kinds of animals and plants that used to live on this island, because the beaver dams anchor that whole community. They get you ponds and swamps, and frogs and aquatic plants and some freshwater fish, and so on. That's what Eric Sanderson taught us. One of the great New Yorkers. He's the one who started the Mannahatta Project."

"Hey look, is that a muskrat there?"

Roberto killed the motor and they drifted with the slow flushing of water in this part of the intertidal. Under the mass of junk at Park and Fifty-fourth, the water was perturbed by small corrugated wakes. "That's their sign," Mr. Hexter whispered. "The multiple wakes are from their whiskers. They can kind of smell the water, or feel it, with their whiskers. Ondathra, the Indians here called them. Like a Japanese movie monster. Or musquash. You can smell them, they're pretty musky. I think this family is rebuilding its push-up. It's like a beaver lodge but smaller. It sits over the entry to their burrow."

"But what can they burrow into there?"

"Holes in abandoned buildings."

"Like the ones we saw in the Bronx!"

"That's right. They make underwater entrances, but the burrow is aboveground. That's where they sleep and the moms have their babies and all."

"Its tail is like a snake!"

"Kind of like. Now see, if you had a camera and a good lens, you could take pictures of these guys and add them to the Mannahatta Project."

"Inventing atom bombs?"

"Yes. It's a good group, you guys should join it. You need some kind of project. I say to you what I said before—after finding the *Hussar*, it's only downhill for you guys to keep hunting sunken treasure."

"But what about Melville? He lived right next door to us!"

"That's true, and it would be nice to put a plaque up or something. Maybe we could talk to the city about doing blue oval plaques, like in England. We would have Melville, and Teddy Roosevelt, and Stieglitz and O'Keefe, and all kinds of other people. But taking his gravestone from dry land to tideland is probably a bad idea. Really, doing anything underwater at this point is probably a bad idea."

The boys didn't like to hear this, but of all the adults in their lives, Mr. Hexter was the one who never told them what to do.

"They'd make you full members of Mannahatta right away. You'd have animals to look for every time you went out. And a lot of the aquaculture pens hate muskrats, because they eat fish if they can get into the cages. So you could go into the business of live-trapping muskrats and moving them away."



"That might be fun," Stefan guessed.

"You've got to do something," Mr. Hexter pointed out. "Now that you are men of leisure. It's a horrible fate to be rich, or so I've heard. You have to figure out something useful and entertaining to do, and it isn't easy."

"We could map the city!" Stefan suggested.

"I love that idea. But I have to admit, they can make pretty good maps with drones these days, or even from space. Kind of takes the fun out of it, maybe."

"So what should we do?"

"I think helping animals sounds good," Hexter said. "Helping animals or helping people. That's the usual solution anyway. That or making things. Maybe you could beautify the city, make artworks out of some of this detritus from the storm. That could be fun. A Goldsworthy on every corner. Or you could go after the rats. Central Park has tons of them. They used to keep lions in the menagerie there, and the rats would come into the lions' cage and eat all the lions' food, and the lions couldn't do a thing about it or they would get chewed to death."

"Yay for the rats!"

"Maybe so. One time they killed two hundred thousand rats in Central Park in a single weekend. A week later the rats were back. I suppose you could become rat catchers."

Roberto wasn't satisfied. "I want to do something big," he said.

afterwards we went to the Brevoort it was much nicer everybody who was anybody was there and there was Emma Goldman eating frankfurters and sauerkraut and everybody looked at Emma Goldman and at everybody else that was anybody and everybody was for peace and the cooperative commonwealth and the Russian revolution and we talked about red flags and barricades and suitable posts for machineguns

and we had several drinks and welsh rabbits and paid our bill and went home, and opened the door with a latchkey and put on pajamas and went to bed and it was comfortable in bed

—John Dos Passos, *USA*

Wisdom is always wont to arrive late, and to be a little approximate on first possession.

supposed Francis Spufford

## c) Charlotte

Charlotte was running for Congress without wasting too much time on it. "Yes," she would admit at evening meetings, or to her wispid while commuting to work, "Yes I'm running, and it's a pain in the ass, but someone has to. Our much unloved Democratic Party has betrayed us yet again with the mayor's craven response to the hurricane, she's not even saying the right things this time, and she's doing the wrong things as always. I know I haven't played the game, I haven't climbed the ladder that the party requires of people to make sure they are fully housebroken before they go down and join the clusterfuck in the capital. But that lack on my part is now an advantage, because that career track is part of what has made the Democratic Party so weak. But I'm a Democrat for lack of anything better, and I intend to speak out of the people's side of our party's two-sided mouth, and shut the other side that speaks for Denver. That's why I'm running. My platform is similar to the left wing of the party's current platform, you can check out the particulars if you like, the Rad Dems, but know that mainly I'm going down there to speak for intertidal people everywhere, and to speak against the global oligarchy every single day. I'm not taking campaign money from anyone and I don't have any of my own, so I'm mostly doing this in the cloud, like now. Vote for me if you want, and if not, you get what you deserve."

Many variations on that theme. She didn't bother with making nice, and she didn't show up for any number of supposedly crucial events. She did her job at the Householders' Union, helping people who couldn't even vote. She spoke to certain cloud personages, and to friends in certain groups around town. It would be an experiment. Similar campaigns had worked before.

Meanwhile autumn in New York played out in ways that helped her. The Householders' Union's wildcat noncompliance strike was famous and

going strong; not paying rents and mortgages and calling that a political act was proving to be very popular. Markets were holding on by the skin of their teeth, loudly proclaiming everything was fine, but people now spoke of rent using the economists' definition of the word, as any taking of money with no productive economic work created. Taking a cut, corruption, rent-seeking, these were suddenly used as synonyms. The house-holders' strike even looked like a logical response to the bashing of the city by Mother Nature and the clueless intransigence of the absent rich in their empty uptown towers. Strike, therefore! and watch the house of cards fall. Everything that happened seemed to play to her campaign message.

The plutocracy hid offshore behind its algorithms, the private security mercenaries continued to play Snidely Whiplash to the NYPD's Dudley Do-Right. The National Guard stood there in Morningside Heights and tried to have it both ways. Everyone kept playing their parts as if things hadn't changed, as she never lost an opportunity to point out. Maybe she too was playing her part, but she had been dealt a great hand this time, it seemed to her. And if not, they would get what they deserved, all of them.

"I don't care!" she kept saying. "Vote for me if you want, and if not, fine. It would save me an enormous hassle to lose this. I'm only doing it because someone has to, some poor public-service bureaucrat schmuck. I can't believe it's me but I got talked into it. I'm sorry I'm such a sucker, but my mom read books to me and I guess that did it. I believed the stories. I still do. And I'm a hard worker, having nothing better to do with my time. So vote for me, so I don't feel like more of an idiot than I already do."

Her poll numbers trended upward, and this gave her the confidence to start speaking more explicitly about the left wing of the Democratic Party, a burgeoning national movement, and how they intended to usurp the business chickenshits among them once and for all, and see if government could go back to being the people's company. "Look, finance is blowing up again, another of their gambling bubbles has popped and they are right now going to Congress demanding another taxpayer bailout like they always do. Give us all the money we blew, they're saying, or we'll blow up the world. They hope to get paid again before November, when a new Congress might do something different. Which we will, if you elect enough of us Rad Dems. We'll act in congress in Congress, there's candidates like me everywhere, and this time we'll save the economy for us, not

for the rich. That's what's scaring them now, the fact that a real plan has reared its ugly head, and it's called this: nationalize the banks. Make that whole giant leech on the real economy into a credit union, and squeeze all that blood money we've lost back into us."

She stopped herself before the image of squeezing a leech to get your blood back into you got too vivid. She could definitely get creative in a bad way when she was on a roll. Have a glass of wine, close her eyes and let it rip. Too angry to care anymore. And her numbers were trending up, so it seemed to be working, which made her even more creative. This was how it was going to work, if it was going to work at all. She even started attending campaign events. But a lot of it was just her talking to her wrists and broadcasting it to whoever. Talking to the city like a crazy person on a soapbox in the park. Dangerous, sure. But so was caution. And because of the Homeholders' Union, she had standing.

Also Amelia put out a photo of herself and a leopard under the banner ALL THE GREAT MAMMALS ARE VOTING FOR CHARLOTTE. Leopard sitting on its haunches like a dog. Amelia standing right next to it, both of them unclotted and unrepentantly beautiful. Out on some Africa plain backed by a turquoise sky. Same calm look from both as they stared into the camera. "Okay," Charlotte said. "I love you."

Meanwhile, in her real job, in the real world, the union had shifted its focus from immigrants to refugees, or whatever you might call the quarter or so of the city's residents now needing help. They ranged from legal citizens of the intertidal to undocumented squatters who had never been on anyone's radar up to this point, but whatever their legal status, they had been rendered homeless by the storm and were now occupying Central Park, or parts of uptown, or any semisubmerged dwelling that hadn't completely melted. The rough guess was that there were about a million of them, maybe two, and quite a large percentage of those were hoping to survive this incident without actually going above the radar and getting entered into the city's systems, or even counted. This was a huge problem for the bureaucracy charged with keeping the refugees alive and free of disease.

On the other hand, one development helping the city's effort was that the usual influx of immigrants from elsewhere appeared to be sharply down. It made sense; people didn't usually make great efforts to smuggle

themselves into a disaster area. Those who did often had bad intentions, so now it felt morally defensible to deny entry to anyone newly trying to come to the city. A system almost Chinese in its style was spontaneously generating in the mayor's office to deal with residency permits, and it was ugly, and probably unconstitutional, but for the moment a small help. They already had enough people with problems, the city was saying. Come back later. Go away now.

Of course there were still some coming in under the radar, as always. Some of these no doubt were criminals hoping to predate on refugees, and police were doing what they could to maintain order, even as they were also struggling to exert control over the private security armies working all over the island and harbor. That struggle was veering right to the edge of a little civil war. When the National Guard joined the NYPD in this struggle it was a big help, a big moment. Charlotte paused to wonder what it meant when a police state was aspirational, a staying off of a worse fate, but then she went back to work. Every day there was more to do.

What this meant for Charlotte was a constant stream of clients beseeching help to find housing, as their old accommodations had been damaged or wrecked. Housing relocation; this was what she had done before the storm, so in a way it was just life as usual, amped a thousandfold. Life as emergency: it wasn't her style, or maybe it was, but it couldn't be maintained at this price; she had already been maxed out before. So now there was nothing for it but to bear down and take life minute by minute, day after day. Do what she could with what she had at that moment. The days flew by.

With infrastructure and housing stock as thrashed as it was, many city departments were coming to the HU to get help in organizing the refugee efforts. This gave Charlotte some leverage within the city system and also provided an indirect way to critique the mayor and her people. Many city bureaucrats were now working around the mayor's office to get to people who would really help them. Charlotte was one node in that alternate system, and without criticizing the mayor outright, she was happy to see a kind of dual power alternative networking below the level of the mayor's office, which was still focusing most of its efforts on burnishing the mayor's image, as always. Aside from that ceaseless effort her whole team was useless, and people started telling them so, or ignoring them altogether. And word of this got around.

"Who cares what the figurehead on the ship looks like when there's leaks under the waterline?" Charlotte said in one of her wrist messages to the public. "Just speaking for myself, as a candidate for the congressional office that the mayor hopes to fill with one of her useless flunkies."

Back at the Met, late every evening, she would scavenge a meal and put her feet up somewhere in the crowds of the dining hall. More satisfying than her daily grind, or the campaign hammer-and-tongs, was working with Franklin Garr on his redevelopment project. At this point it had contracted down to eight blocks in Chelsea, as a kind of pilot project. Franklin's investment group (which included the Met gold gang) had secured provisional property rights, as good as could be gotten for the intertidal, plus demolition permits, building permits, and the funding to build. The funding was a combination of their monetized gold, federal and nonprofit grants, angel investors, venture capital, and ordinary loans, achieved before the paralysis of the liquidity crisis and credit crunch, which was growing worse by the day. A construction team had been assembled, he said; this was no easy feat, given how busy contractors were now. Workers in the building trades from Boston to Atlanta were streaming in to New York to reconstruct the city, but there still weren't enough of them, so the main coup for Franklin had been the assembling of the construction team itself. "How did you get them to agree to do it?" she asked him.

"We went to Miami. There are firms down there that have been doing this kind of stuff for years. Also we paid them double their usual rates."

"Good for you. Hey—I can provide you with occupants."

"Such a challenge! First get me more anchor cords and sleeves."

These were what would connect the block rafts to bedrock. Bedrock in Franklin's neighborhood turned out to be 160 feet below the canal bottom; this was bad, but not impossible so. Another cost. The moving parts, or stretchy parts, that would extend between the deep bollards and the floating platforms were the crux of the problem, according to Franklin's head contractor. Some of the new stretchtech came from biomimicry, tricks learned from kelp beds or limpets or human fascia, and it was wonderfully effective, but relatively new and rare, and therefore expensive.

And they had to accommodate the conventional buildings still surrounding their neighborhood. "Eventually the whole of lower Manhattan

will move together like eelgrass. In the meantime, we'll need clearances and leeways and bumpers."

"What about the demolition?"

"It's going well. Vlade's friend Idelba is part of that team; she's dredging the bottom to get things clear before they caisson it and drill to bedrock. She's doing us a favor, because every dredge in this harbor is going full tilt right now, and she wants to get back to Coney Island. But this is a pretty small job by her standards, and she's willing to fit it in."

"Good to hear."

"Have you eaten yet?"

"No, I mean I slurped up some of the dregs, but not really. Oh God, it's ten already."

"Let's go out and grab a bite."

"Okay."

While gobbling down a quick meal in the deli occupying the prow of the *Fafron*, Charlotte asked Franklin what he thought of the situation in finance.

Franklin waggled a hand as he swallowed and then said, "It's all happening. They're freaking out. All of them are leveraged out over the abyss, and their pole vaults are cracking. They're still trying to stave it off, so it's a bit slow-motion compared to some bubble pops, but the full-on crash is starting."

"When though?"

"It depends on how long they try to pretend things are okay. The people most exposed are still running around looking for ways out, so they want things to look okay for as long as possible."

"So maybe it's time for me to go to my Fed Ex again?"

"If you think he needs encouraging."

"I think he probably does."

"Then you definitely should."

At that point they were interrupted by a roving troupe of players who were performing a bluegrass version of *The Pirates of Penzance*, played on banjo and fiddle and concertina and kazoo, and sung so beautifully, and loudly, with the back of the banjo right there in their faces, that they could only sit back and enjoy.

Falling asleep that night, Charlotte thought over their conversation, and in the morning she sent Larry a message.

Coffee? Dinner?

You're kidding, right?

No. You've got to eat, and so do I.

I'm in D.C.

I bet you are. End of world yet?

Close.

Coming up here soon therefore?

True.

And must eat, even as world ends.

True.

Dinner? Breakfast?

Dinner. Tuesday.

.....

So she was getting ready to go to dinner with Larry on Tuesday, cutting short any number of other critical items on her to-do list, when Gen Octaviadotit pinged her.

"You know the people who had Mut and Jeff kidnapped?" Gen said from Charlotte's wrist. "The security firm we think was involved with that? It looked like they worked for Henry Vinson, like I told you. And that made sense, given everything we knew. We've had all those people under surveillance. But on the night of the tower riot, I got talking to a man who worked for that firm, and he told me some stuff, and I've had my assistant checking out what he told me. And it looks to be true. Pinker worked for Vinson, but Rapid Noncompliance Abtarscher Pinkerton worked for Vinson, but Rapid Noncompliance Abtarscher came into the picture later. And RNA's head guy, Escher, has been working for Larry Jackman."

"Whoa." Charlotte tried to comprehend. "What does that mean?" Then it hit her. "Fuck! You mean Larry's been the asshole behind all this?" A sudden fury at him made the world go red, yet another physiological reaction common to all. She saw red!

"Well, but it's more complicated than that," Gen told her as her vision

came back. "Come on down to the common room and I'll explain it to you in person."

"Okay sure. I've got to leave soon, but it's to go see Larry Jackman. So I need to hear this!"

"You most definitely do."

.....

There was a little restaurant in Soho where they used to go in the old days. Charlotte thought it was a little strange Larry had suggested it, but she liked the food and didn't want to be muddying the waters with any counter-suggestions, given how busy he must be. The waters were going to get muddy enough as it was.

It was a tiny place, a kind of interspace between two buildings that had been captured as another set of rooms, maybe in the nineteenth century. Behind the long bar was a model of the Manhattan skyline made of liquor bottles. A waitress seated them in the upstairs room, overlooking a courtyard like an air shaft, brick-walled, with a single tree surviving improbably down below them. Being protected from the hurricane winds, it still had its summer leaves. Looking down on the leaves was like looking at some kind of brilliant Chinese artwork.

"So how's it going?" Charlotte asked when their drinks had come.

Larry lifted his glass of white wine, clinked it against hers.

"Your household's defaults are causing a panic," Larry said, looking at his glass. "You won't be surprised to hear."

"No."

"Did you ask your friend Amelia Black to start it?"

"I don't know her that well."

"She seems like a complete idiot," he complained.

"No, not at all. She's pretty sharp."

"You're kidding."

"She has a cloud persona, that's all. Maybe you could put it that way. Do you know the story about Marilyn Monroe?"

"No."

"One time she was walking down Park Avenue with Susan Strasberg and no one was paying attention to them, and Marilyn said, 'Do you want

to see her? And then she changed her posture and the way she was looking around, and all of a sudden they were mobbed. Amelia is maybe a little like that."

"I don't see how that would work."

"Maybe we should stick to numbers."

He accepted the rebuke with a little hunching of the shoulders. Such joy, dinner with the ex, his posture said. Charlotte reminded herself to curb her tongue. Very difficult. Possibly a certain merry sadism was obtruding into her from below at the fact of her meeting her famous Fed Ex in these particular circumstances, but there was a higher purpose that she had to remember.

"I only mean," she said, "that Amelia's carefully disguised and possibly unconscious brilliance is not the point here. The point is the banks freaking. They were all leveraged to at least fifty times what they have in hand, right?"

He nodded. "That's legal."

"So it's like they're skybridges extending out into space without touching anything at their far ends. And now a hurricane like our Fyodor is hitting, and all these skybridges are waving around, about to detach and fly away."

"An ornate image," Larry noted.

"No one wants to walk on these bridges right now."

He nodded. "Very true. Loss of trust."

She couldn't help smiling: "You always know economists are in deep shit when they start talking about trust and value. Usually when you say fundamentals to them they're like interest rates and price of gold. Then a bubble bursts and the fundamentals become trust and value. How do you create trust, keep it, restore it? And what's the ultimate source of value? I've been reading some of the history on this, I'm sure you already know it. Do you remember when Bernanke had to admit that the government was the ultimate guarantor of value, when he bailed out the banks in the 2008 crash?"

Larry nodded.

"A famous moment, right? Rising almost to the point of political economy, or even philosophy?"

"An infamous moment," he corrected.

"Notorious! Horrible for any economist to hear! The ultimate put-down of the market!"

"Well, I don't know about that. The view would be that the market sets the value, just by what buyers and sellers agree is the price. Free undertaking of a contract, all that."

"But that was always bullshit."

"You say that, but what do you mean?"

"I mean prices are systemically low, result of collusion between buyers and sellers, who agree to fuck the future generations so that they can get what they want, which is cheap stuff and profits both."

This was what Jeff had taught her up on the farm, and what he had earlier tried foolishly to correct, or at least express, with his graffiti hacks.

"Well, even if that were true, what could we do about it?"

"It would take values, rather than value. It would take values setting the value."

"Good luck with that."

She stared at him. "Have you gotten cynical, or were you always cynical?"

"Isn't that kind of a, you know, have-you-stopped-beating-your-wife question?"

"You would never beat anyone," Charlotte said. "I know that. In fact I know you're a good person and not cynical at all, that's why I'm talking to you like this. I guess I'm wondering why you are trying to sound cynical right when you have the chance to do some good. Are you scared?"

"Of what?"

"Well, of making history, I guess. It would be a big move."

"What would?"

"What we talked about, Larry. The time is now. The banks and the big investment firms and hedge funds are all coming to you begging for another bailout. They are envisioning 2008 and 2066, and why shouldn't they? It keeps on happening! They gamble and lose, they can't handle it, they come to you and cry, and threaten you with collapse of the global economy and a gigantic depression, and you create and hand over cash directly to them, and they bank it and wait out the storm, wait till other people get the ball rolling, and then they start gambling all over again. And now they own eighty percent of the world's capital assets, and buy



all the governments and laws, and you were part of that for many years. And now they're doing it again. So they probably expect it will all go as it always has."

"Because there's not a counterexample," he suggested, sipping his wine as he watched her.

"Sure there is. The 1930s depression brought huge structural adjustments, and the banks were put on a leash, and the rich were taxed like crazy, and what mattered were people."

"There was World War Two to help all that, as I recall."

"That was later, and it helped, but the structural adjustments in favor of people over banks had already happened when the war started."

"I'll look into that."

"You should. You'll find that the Fed ruled the banks, and the tax rate on annual income over four hundred thousand dollars was ninety percent."

"Really?"

"Ninety-one percent. They didn't like rich people. World War Two made them very impatient with rich people. It was a Republican president who did it."

"Hard to believe."

"Not really. Stretch your imagination."

"You're doing it for me."

"My pleasure. Anyway, even in 2008 they nationalized General Motors, and they could have nationalized the banks too, as a condition for giving them about fifteen trillion dollars. They didn't do that because they were bankers themselves, and chickenshits. But they could have. And now you can do it."

"But what do you mean, nationalize? I don't even know what you mean."

"Sure you do." Franklin had suggested this riposte. "I don't know, but you do. So you tell me what it means! All I know is you protect the depositors. And I presume any profits the banks make from then on will go to the government, to pay back what they borrowed from it. So they turn into like federal credit unions."

"Why would anyone work in a bank, then?"

"For a salary! A good salary, but just a salary. Like anyone else."

"Why would shareholders invest in a bank, then?"

"Same reason they buy T-bills. Security. Secure investment."

"I can't even imagine it."

"Your lack of imagination is not good grounds for making policy."

Larry shook his head. "I don't know. Why would they say yes to this?"

"Say yes or go bust! You offer the deal to the biggest bank, or the biggest bank in the worst trouble, the one about to blow up first. Put the fucking screws on them, they accept the deal or you let them fall as an encouragement to the others. So either way you're okay. If they accept, the others have to fall in line or collapse. If they don't accept, you blow the worst one up and go to the next one in line on the gangplank and say, Do you want to go down like Citibank or do you want to live?"

He laughed. "It would get their attention."

"Of course! And you print the fucking money you're bailing them out with anyway, so why should you worry? To you it's just quantitative easing!"

"Inflation," he said. "Sure to happen."

"Except when it doesn't. Come on, don't pretend theory works here. Besides you want a little inflation, that's economic health, right?"

"But it can so quickly get out of hand."

"When you own the banks, you can definitely deal with it. You'll have your foot on the gas and the brakes."

He shook his head. "If only it were as simple as that."

She stared at him.

"It would help if there was support in Congress," he mentioned, glancing at her. The whole meal he had been looking into his wineglass, as if peering into a crystal ball and hoping for a vision. Now he was looking at her.

"I know," she said. "I'm trying. If I'm elected I'll help, but either way there'll be a group there to help. People are mad. I mean really mad. Unusually mad."

"It's true. And then you told them to stop paying their mortgages."

"Well, it's Amelia who started that, but yeah. She was right. We want a better deal. We're on strike against God."

Their food came and they ate. They talked about the city's recovery, the various problems and efforts. The way their old walking routes in Central Park had been wiped off the map. The way the past was gone, or, not.

On to dessert, one crème brûlée between them. As tradition demanded, they fenced over it with spoons, cracking the burnt surface and knocking each other's spoons aside, finally chopping a line down the middle to delineate their portions. At that point Charlotte decided the atmosphere was friendly enough to bring up a delicate matter.

"So," she said, "let me tell you a story. And I want you to know right from the start that it isn't blackmail or anything."

"That's so reassuring," Larry said, eyes going a little round. He was far past making up expressions; this was real consternation.

"I hope so. Just listen. Once upon a time, there was a big investment firm with a couple hotshots running it. One of them was an asshole and a cheater, one of them was a nice guy. The cheater was cheating systematically in ways that were submerged so deep that the nice guy didn't even know they were happening. That could happen, right?"

"Maybe," Larry said, poking around in the crème brûlée as if looking for something.

"So then a quant working for them found this cheat, and tried to whistle-blow. But the cheater found out about it, and he went to his personal security team and said, 'Will not someone rid me of this mad quant? And his security said, 'We can do that no problem. Seeing as they were high on the FBI's list of worst private security firms. Which is saying a great deal. But then the nice guy found out about it. That his partner had hired someone to kill someone to keep his cheating a secret. Which, due to joint enterprise laws, was their cheating. As the murder would be also.'"

Larry was now chewing on his spoon a little, and his pale freckled Ivy League skin was a little flushed.

"So, at that point the nice guy was in a fix. Joint enterprise laws are crazy these days. If you know someone is going to commit a crime, you become a party to it. And the cheater had some stuff he could blow the nice guy up with, maybe. But the nice guy had his own security company, more reputable than the cheater's, and bigger. So he asks his security to enact a little preemptive involuntary witness protection on the quants in danger. And his team does that, moving fast to prevent the hit. They are not geniuses either, being private security after all, and they do the first thing that comes to mind. But then they have these quants they have saved from getting killed. They have to figure out how to release them back

to the wild while still keeping them safe and the situation stable. It's not obvious, but there's no rush. So the situation hangs fire for a while."

"So, you mentioned this isn't blackmail," Larry reminded her. "And I can see that. So I'm waiting for the bad part."

"Oh it's just a story. I tell the story because it was told to me by a friend of mine, Inspector Gen Octaviusdottr. She lives in my building, and she's very devoted to the New York Police Department, and to lower Manhattan, and she's well-known down there as the solver of all kinds of mysterious crimes. But she's a pretty unconventional thinker, I guess you'd call it, when it comes to enforcement of the laws. She has her own views. And she likes those quants, and she's happy that someone made an effort to keep them alive. And so she likes whoever that was. So she told me that although she and her team worked out the details of this story, she also gathered all the evidence herself, and she and her team have it sequestered, kind of like those quants were. No one else has the story, or at least the evidence to prove it, and she doesn't plan on giving it to anybody. So if, for instance, the cheater ever tried to blackmail the nice guy in the fairy tale, it wouldn't work. There's nothing there, all the way back up the line. And now it's a matter of letting the whole thing sink to the bottom of the canals. To the dark and backward abyss of time."

Larry swallowed the last of the crème brûlée. "Interesting," he said.

"I hope so," Charlotte said. "The main thing to take from it is that my friend the inspector is a very good friend to have. I kind of love her. Like once we asked her for some financial advice, about an inheritance some young friends of ours had come into, and you wouldn't believe how good her advice was. Possibly semilegal, but good. She basically made those kids rich. So she's a good friend to have, and to keep. A very strong sense of what's just. So that she ends up doing a kind of anti-blackmail blackmail, if you see what I mean."

"Mmm," he said, savoring the final spoonful. Or maybe it was "Hmmm."

They ate in silence for a while.

"Cognac?" she suggested.

"Please."



## d) Vlade

Once I pass'd through a populous city imprinting my brain for  
future use with its shows, architecture, customs, traditions,  
Yet now of all that city I remember only a woman I casually met  
there who detain'd me for love of me,  
Day by day and night by night we were together—all else has long  
been forgotten by me,  
I remember I say only that woman who passionately clung to me,  
Again we wander, we love, we separate again,  
Again she holds me by the hand, I must not go,  
I see her close beside me with silent lips sad and tremulous.

—Walt Whitman

Vlade spent his days working on the building, as always. Things were back to normal, whatever normal was, he couldn't remember. All the years had congealed together in his head like the mud on the canal bottoms, and the events since the start of the storm had been so overwhelming that the past before it was more squished than ever. Also the building was still stuffed with new refugees Charlotte insisted had to be sheltered until other arrangements could be found, and this was bad, because the building had already been full before the storm, so now things were simply desperate, and yet at the same time many of their refugees were very grateful to be there and had fallen in love with the Met, the way a limpet falls in love with a pier piling it runs into after being scraped off a ship. They would have to be pried off the walls here too, and at that point, as Charlotte had put it, the communal ethos of one for all and all for one would become an obstacle to good governance. They would have to re-dine *all* to mean *some*, as in any situation that wasn't the whole world. It would be awkward.

Meanwhile it was just crowd control, coping with power and water and sewage. Happily food was not his problem, but he did have to help get it into the kitchens, and then get the various residues out of the building. Compost all saved in house now, as they were baking up many boxes of new soil. And now Vlade was thinking about storm windows for the farm, and that wasn't going to be easy, or fast, or cheap. Not that there was any time for that now. No, it was a crazy time, a crazy fall in the city.

However: the sabotage attacks on the building had stopped, as far as he could tell. And if he couldn't tell whether they were happening or not, then all was well. He mentioned this to Charlotte once when she was home and they were dealing with refugee guest problems. She still hadn't given up on being chair of the co-op board, though many urged

her to. But not Vlade; even at only ten minutes a day she was better than any of the other board members, as far as he was concerned. One of the bad aspects of her running for Congress was the likelihood that she would win, and then she really would have to quit the board, at least for two years and maybe for good. That would be a disaster, but he would cross that bridge when he got to it.

She laughed when he mentioned the cessation of sabotage. "They're the ones sabotaged now. The tables are turned, they're rocked on their heels. The empty towers scandal was the first blow, and now their investments are in free fall. I think whoever was making offers on us might be very busy right now avoiding bankruptcy."

"I like the sound of that," Vlade said.

She nodded. "Meanwhile, we should be free of harassment. Also of any hostile takeover bids. Actually I was kind of looking forward to the vote on that comeback offer, because I think knowing we've been under attack, it would have gone down again. That would have been nice. But to have it withdrawn is even nicer."

"Hurray for the storm," Vlade said, unamused by his own joke. She nodded, similarly unamused. "Silver linings," she remarked, and got up to go to her next meeting.

So that was one good thing. And another was Idelba, still staying on his office couch at night. They would get up in the morning and get dressed and go off and do their thing without a word to each other, and without communication during the day. Idelba was going to move her tug and barge back out to Coney Island soon, and there was a lot to do. But then at the end of the day, after dinner, there she would be, in his apartment, and then they would get ready for bed like castaways struck on the same life raft. He could feel the pain in her, and then he could feel it in himself. They knew what they were remembering, and neither of them wanted to talk about it. He could still feel that crunch of the tug against the building, see the blood on the wall and in the water. The look on her face, the looking away ever since. Nothing to be done; nothing to be said. Just stay in his office at night, saying nothing.

And it wasn't just those poor strangers they had crushed, of course. They knew that too. Back when their child had drowned, they had tried to talk about it. Had tried not to blame each other. There was no reason

for blame, it had been an accident. Still it had driven them apart. There was no denying that. Vlade had felt blamed, and tried not to resent it. Drank more, dove more. Spent his life underwater, where unfortunately you couldn't really forget a drowning, but it was his job, his life; and so when he came up he drank. And she had seen that and gotten mad, or sad. They had drifted apart as if on different icebergs, right there in the same apartment in Stuyvesant, jammed right on each other but a million miles apart. He had never been lonelier. If you are in bed next to a person, naked under the sheets, but alone, totally alone: maybe that's the worst solitude. He had spent the years since then sleeping alone and yet felt far less solitary than he had that year in that bed. By the time Idelba had moved out they were both wordless, catatonic. Nothing to say. Grief kills speech, drives you down into a hole alone. Look, everyone's going to die, he had wanted to say. But even so... but there had been nothing that came next. It didn't help to say it. Nor to say anything. It would only add to the solitude.

Bad times. Bad years. Then more years had passed, and more still, in a kind of oblivion; it had been sixteen years now, how could that be? What was time, where did it go? Closing on twenty years, and here they were now, with all that still in them.

And at the end of every day she came back to his rooms. And one night she came in and hugged him so hard he could feel his ribs as a cage of bone around his innards. He didn't know what was happening. He was bigger than her, but she was stronger. He resisted the squeeze, then felt it as her opening in a conversation that they couldn't manage to speak. They were neither of them good at talking about things like this. Her native tongue was Berber, his was Serbo-Croatian. But that wasn't it.

Maybe they didn't need speech. That night they went to sleep in their different rooms. More days passed. One night she slept on his bed next to him, saying nothing. After that they slept together through the nights, barely touching, wearing night clothes. Autumn passed, the days got shorter, the nights longer. Sometimes in the middle of the night he would wake up and roll over onto his other side, and there she would be, lying on her back. Seemed always to be awake. Rigid, or sometimes not. She would turn her head and look at him, and in the dark he could see nothing but the whites of her eyes. Such dark and lustrous skin: she glowed darkly in the dark. He could see that whatever she was thinking, which was

God knew what, she wanted to be there. Once he put a hand on her arm. They were the same warmth. She moved her head toward him and they kissed, briefly, chaste, their bunched lips just touching in a knot, like you would with a friend. She looked at him like a mind reader. She rolled toward him, pushed him onto his back, rolled halfway onto him. They lay there clutched together like drowning people going down. I'll be with you when the deal goes down. She lay there for most of an hour, seemed for a while to be asleep, but mostly not, mostly awake, silent. Breathing into each other, rising and falling together. When she rolled back off him his left leg had gone to sleep. The rest of him fell asleep holding her hip.

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One sunny day late in October she tugged the barge back to Coney Island and anchored the barge to the loop of cable still tied to massive bollards off the sunken boardwalk. Vlade went with her, towing his boat behind the barge, so he could get back to the city the next day.

As before Hurricane Fyodor, they were well offshore. The shallows below them were maybe more turbid than usual, and the shoreline to the north looked perhaps lower, more battered. When they were anchored they took one of Idelba's pilot boats and a couple of her crew up Ocean Parkway to where Brooklyn now rose out of the ocean, to have a look around. They took it slow, as the canal was obstructed.

The intertidal exposed by low tide was thrashed, and above the high tide mark, heavily junked with rubbish of all kinds. Buildings had collapsed for four or five blocks inland. It was hard to see any sign at all of the many bargeloads of sand that Idelba and her colleagues had moved from the drowned beach up to the new shoreline. "Damn," Idelba exclaimed.

"That's like five hundred bargeloads of sand, just disappeared! How could it be? Where did it go?"

"Inland," Vlade supposed. "Or offshore. Do you want to go down and have a look?"

"I kind of do. Are you up for it?"

"Always."

This was almost true. Stripping down, getting the drysuits on, gearing up and psyching up—all this was a spur to the blood, always, and never so much as when prepping with Idelba.

Over the side they were lowered, into the cold water. Down into the murk, the stupendously powerful Mercia headlamps cutting short fat cones of illuminated water ahead of them. Low tide, so the bottom was just ten or fifteen feet under the boat's keel, meaning there was a bit of ambient light too, which actually made the water seem more opaque rather than less. Water getting colder as it pressed on them. From cold, to colder, to coldest. *Coldissimo*, Rosario called it.

The bottom had sand. He fanned it with his fins, and in the light from his headlamp saw it swirl up and join the general turbidity, then fall again. It was heavier than the glacial silt in till; it did not stay suspended in the water. He looked toward Idelba without pointing his headlamp at her. The bubbles releasing from Idelba's gear shimmied up toward the surface, turning silver and disappearing overhead. He pointed down at the sand. They bumped helmets and he could see her grinning through her faceplate. Some of her new beach was still down there, and near enough to the tide line that wave action would move it there. Ultimately sand was where it was because waves pushed it there.

The storm had really thrashed the bottom. Vlade didn't want to put his feet down flat, fins or no; seemed like a curl of broken glass could slice your foot in half, as had happened to Vlade's brother once when they were kids. So Vlade swam horizontally above the bottom, floating around to inspect it. Here lay a half-buried wooden box, but not one that would hold any treasure; there a chunk of concrete stuck with lengths of rebar, ready to tear someone in half; there an armchair, resting on the bottom as if a living room had stood right there. The weirdness of the intertidal.

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That evening he ate with Idelba and her crew, in the little commons room of their bridge.

"There's still sand down there," Idelba told her crew. "Not a lot, but some. We'll just keep pouring it on."

Abdul, who was from Algeria and was always giving the Moroccans a lot of lip, said, "I read when they were building Jones Beach, Robert Moses got mad because the wind kept blowing the sand away. His people explained it was dune grass that stabilized dunes, so he ordered a thousand gardeners to the beach, and they planted a million sedge starts."

The others laughed.

"We'll pull Jones Beach too," Idelba said. "Coney Island, Rockaway, Long Beach, Jones Beach, Fire Island. All the way out to Montauk. Move it all up to the new tide line."

The crew seemed to regard this endless task as a good thing. It was like working on the Met; it would never end. One of them raised a glass, and the others did likewise.

"One can easily imagine Sisyphus happy," Abdul declared, and they drank to that.

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The others then played cards, while Vlade and Idelba went out to look at the waterfront, leaning on the rail.

"What are you going to do?" Vlade asked her, not knowing how else to put it.

"You heard it in there," she said. "I'll stay here and work."

"What about your share of the gold?"

"Oh yeah, I'll be happy to have that."

"You could probably retire on it."

"Why would I want to do that? I like doing this."

"I know."

"Will you stop running your building?"

"No. I like it. I might hire a few more people. Especially since I've got some people I should fire."

"Well, but you should have the co-op do that."

"I will. Anyway I like to work."

"Everyone does."

He looked at her in the dim twilight. Her hawkish profile: that raptor power, that distant gaze. The low rise of Brooklyn was nearly pure black, just a scattered spangling of lights between the shore and the skyline. "What about us?" he ventured to ask.

"What about us?" She didn't look at him.

"You'll be here, I'll be in the city."

She nodded. "It's not so far." She slipped her hand under his arm. "You have your work and I have mine. So maybe we can just go on. I'll come into the city some weekends, or you can come out here."

"You could buy a little blimp."

She laughed. "I'm not sure it'd be much faster."

"True. But you know what I mean."

"I think so. Yes. I will fly to you."

He felt a deep breath fill him. Nitrogen narcosis. Breeze off the land. A calmness that he hadn't felt in so long, he could not name the feeling. Couldn't understand it. Could scarcely feel it, it was so strange a sensation.

"That sounds good," he said. "I would like that."

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The next morning he went back up on deck. He had slept in Idelba's bed with her, and slipped out just at dawn, leaving her asleep, mouth open, looking girlish. A middle-aged Maghrebi woman.

It was amazing to stand on the bridge of the tug and look up and down the coast. Far to the east, the boiling white reefs marked where Rockaway Beach had been; it seemed a huge distance and yet it was a tiny fraction of Long Island, which was invisible beyond Breezy Point. Then in the other direction, it was such a clear morning that it was possible to see not just Saten Island, but the glints of morning windowblink from Jersey. The Bight of New York, split by the Narrows. At the end of the Ice Age, Mr. Hexter had told them, a glacial lake had filled the Hudson Valley, from Albany down to the Battery. The melting ice of the great northern ice cap had filled it higher and higher and higher, until finally the waters had burst through the Narrows and poured down to the Atlantic, which at that time was many miles to the south. For a month or so the outflow was a hundred times greater than the flow of the Amazon, until the long lake was drained. After that the Narrows were carved deep, and when the Atlantic rose far enough, the glacial lake had refilled as the fjord and estuary they had now. Under the blue waves Vlade now looked at that Hudson outbreak flood had left a submarine canyon that still cut the continental shelf. Vlade had dived its walls in his youth. A very impressive underwater canyon, scoring the continental shelf all the way out to the drop-off to the abyssal plain. All that wild depth, all that cataclysmic history, now hidden by a smooth blue sheet of water, slightly wrinkled by an onshore breeze, on an ordinary autumn morning.

So: maybe he was the lake. Maybe he was the outbreak through the

Narrows. Maybe Idelba was the mighty Atlantic. There would never be an end to it. One must imagine Sisypus happy. And it was easy to do, on a morning like this.

.....

Then election day came and Charlotte won. Idelba came into the city and joined them all in the Met's common area for a big party. She helped Vlade get the common room ready, and of course for a thing like this there was no shortage of help. The Flatiron also wanted to host a celebration, and they talked about filling the entire six acres of Madison Square bacio with boats, so they could lay a temporary floor of interlocking platforms and dance right on the water, as they would have if the freeze of this coming winter had yet arrived. It was discussed at length and then abandoned as too much trouble, but what it meant was that the party had to be spread out, a progressive moving from rooms to rooftops to terraces all around the square, and onto big boats in it, and indeed in the end they placed gangplanks connecting eight barges to each other, and to many of the buildings ringing the square, and people wandered around all night long partying. Quite a few parties fell in the drink.

Charlotte herself didn't show up until midnight, having gone to work that day as if it were a normal day. She was irritated at having to stop the normality when she got home, and even more irritated that she was going to have to stop it for good. She had proposed continuing to head the Householders' Union while serving in Congress: there was no law against that, she said, but most people hoped she would finally come round to seeing how impractical it would be. Not to mention some kind of conflict of interest.

"I plan to come back every weekend," she declared in her brief concession to giving a victory speech. "I don't know how, given the way this storm hammered the rail lines, but I will. I don't like it down there."

People cheered.

"Damn it," she went on when urged to continue, "this is horrible. Being elected, I mean. But also what's happened to the city. It'll take years to regrow the trees and rebuild. It's such a big job it's probably best to think of it as some kind of cosmic demolition that allows us to start over. That's how I'll be thinking of it. We're in the middle of another crash, headed

for another big recession. Every time this happens there's an opportunity to seize the reins and change direction, but up until now we've chickened out and besides our government has been bought by the people causing the crash. And we don't even know what to try for.

"This time we'll see if we can do better. The new Congress has a lot of new members, and there's a pretty great plan coming from the progressives, I think Teddy Roosevelt announced his presidential bid as candidate of the Progressive party from right here on this square, and he ran that campaign from our Met tower. Actually I think he lost, but whatever. I'll hope to be as cheerful and tough and effective as he was. I'll go join the people trying to do that.

"But damn." She looked at them, sighed. "I'd rather be here among my friends. You are certainly all welcome to come down and visit me when I'm in D.C. And I'll be here as much as I am there, I swear."

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After that Ettore and his *piazzollistas* set up and ripped off some torrid tangos for the crowd to dance to. Between songs Ettore wiped his brow and told everyone, with his hand drunkenly on his heart, that the great Astor, Piazzolla himself, had grown up just a few blocks south of where they stood at that very moment. Holy New York, he said, holy New York. The Buenos Aires of the north.

After another song, standing out under the prow of the Flatiron, Vlade and Idelba watched as Franklin's friend Jojo approached Charlotte and congratulated her. Charlotte thanked her and then called Franklin over and asked them to discuss how they could coordinate their Soho and Chelsea redevelopment projects, such that they combined strengths and both got better. Franklin and Jojo agreed to this with a handshake and went over to the drinks table to see if they could find an unopened bottle of bubbly.

Vlade stood in front of Ettore's band, swaying to a *milonga*, feeling the outbreak flood pour through him. Idelba said she was tired and headed over to his office. When the band had played its last song, Vlade walked over to the Met with Charlotte, steering her over the looser gangplanks; she seemed wasted.

In the dining room she sat down heavily next to Amelia Black and Gordon Hexer. Vlade sat across from them.

"Maybe you can settle Stefan and Roberto in my room," she said to Vlade. "They can house-sit the place for me."

He gave her a look. "Won't you need it when you come back to visit?" "Sure, but I can sleep in one of the other dorms, or they can. With the best will in the world, I won't be around that much. Not at first."

She looked so tired. Vlade put a hand to her arm. "It will be okay," he said. "We'll help out here. The building will be fine. And I think you needed a change of pace anyway. Something new."

She nodded, looking unconvinced. Trying to get a hold on some kind of bitterness, some kind of grief. Vlade didn't get it. Well, joining Congress as a plan to slow down: probably not realistic. Maybe it was just that she liked what she had been doing.

Franklin Garr came breezing in, saw them and came over and leaned down to give Charlotte a hug and a kiss on the head. "Congratulations, dear. I know it's just what you always wanted."

"Fuck you."

He laughed. He was flushed and seemed a little giddy, maybe from talking to his friend from the Flatiron. "Just let me know if there's anything I can do for you. Finance minister without portfolio, right?"

"You're already doing that," she objected.

"Redevelopment czar. Robert Moses meets Jane Jacobs."

"You're already doing that too."

"Okay, so maybe you don't need me."

"No, I need you."

"But not for anything more than what I'm already doing."

She looked up at him, and Vlade saw a new look on her face, an idea she liked. "Well, I wonder," she said. "Could you give me a ride in your stupid little speedboat down to like Philly, or Baltimore? Would that work? Because I need to get down there fast as I can, and the train tracks in Jersey are still fucked up."

He was startled. Vlade could see.

"Might have to recharge," he said. He looked at Vlade: "How far is it?"

"You got me," Vlade said. "Couple hundred miles? How far will your boat go when you got it up on the foils?"

"I don't know. Pretty far, I think. Anyway I can check it out. But

yeah," he said to Charlotte, "of course! Love to take you down there to your coronation."

"Please."

"Your investiture."

"You're the investor."

"Your congressification."

She cracked a smile. "Something like that. My befucking."

"Oh no, dear, you don't have to go all that way for that. Hey I gotta take a call, I'll come down in a while and we can celebrate."

"No!" she called out after him, but he was off to the elevators.

Charlotte looked at Vlade. "A nice young man," she said.

They all stared at her.

"Really?" Vlade said.

Charlotte laughed. "Well I think so. He tries to pretend otherwise, but it keeps breaking out."

"Maybe for you."

"Yes." She thought things over. "How fast does that thing of his go?"

"Too fast. Like seventy or eighty miles an hour."

"And battery charge?"

"It might have enough to get you there."

"Is it safe?"

"No."

"But people do it."

"Oh yeah. People do everything."

"Okay, maybe I will."

"You could always get a ride with Amelia on her blimp."

"Oh yeah, there's a good idea!"

They all laughed together, even Amelia.

"It's not my fault!" she protested, but they only laughed more.

When they had collected themselves, Charlotte said to Vlade, "So what about Helba, where is she?"

"She went to bed. But she's going back out to Coney Island to keep working."

"And so what will happen?"

Vlade shrugged. "We'll see when it happens."

"But you went back over there with her."

"Yeah." He tried to think how to say it. "It seems good. I think it could work. I don't know how. I mean, I don't know what I mean by that."

"Well, that's good."

"Yes. I guess it is."

"Very nice," she said. "I'm happy for you."

"Ah well. Me too."

At the 1964 New York World Fair's International Pavilion, all twenty-two of the visiting Burundis slept in a single room, "just as they would have at home."

One thought ever at the fore—

That in the Divine Ship, the World, breasting Time and Space,  
All Peoples of the globe together sail, sail the same voyage, are  
bound to the same destination.

I see Freedom, completely armed and victorious and very haughty,  
with Law on one side and Peace on the other,  
A stupendous trio all issuing forth against the idea of caste;  
What historic denouements are these we so rapidly approach?

—Walt Whitman



## e) Franklin

So it had got to the point where I looked up Charlotte Armstrong in the cloud and found out that she was sixteen years older than me. Sixteen years, two months, and two days. This was a kind of a shock, a blow, a mind-fuck. Not that I didn't think she was older than me, and we had already gone very far into our young man-old woman shuck, but really I was thinking it was more like, I don't know. As I hadn't been thinking of her that way at all, I just thought of her as a middle-aged woman. Old, for sure, but not *that* old. I didn't know what to make of it. I was stunned to a blankness.

So when she called me to talk more about getting an ocean zoom down to D.C., I said, "Yeah sure!" squeaking like a boy whose voice was changing. I said "When?" rather than *Hey babe I like you but why are you so fucking ancient?* which was on the tip of my tongue. I had to actually bite my tongue not to blurt that out. Not that she wouldn't have laughed if I had, and so I was tempted, because making her laugh was a distinct pleasure, a little hook in my heart that drew a helpless smile on my face, every time. But I restrained myself, being so confused. And she named a date for our trip, and then took me far from those concupiscent thoughts with the following:

"So did you hear that Inspector Gen's data hound cracked Morningside and found out who was making those offers on our building?"

"No, who was it?"

"Angel Falls. That's your guy, right? Hector Ramirez?"

"No way!"

"That's what she said. Her guy got into Morningside by way of one of the security firms they were using, he got all kinds of stuff, and that was in there."

"Damn," I said. "Holy shit. Fuck. Okay, listen—I'm going to go ask him about it."

"You know, with the offer on the Met gone away, I don't know if it matters anymore."

"But he's an angel investor in the Chelsea raft. And the building here was getting fucking sabotaged, right? No, I'm going to go talk to him about it."

So I took the bug out to the Hudson, cutting through traffic like a butcher knifing through joints, then zoomed up the big river. Cloudy day, water the color of flint, disturbed as if schools of tiny fish were swirling around just under the surface. Got Hector's secretariat to ask him for a meeting in the flesh presently, and he said he was about to leave but could meet briefly with me, if it was in the next hour. I said I was already there. Past the salt marsh where I had had my eelgrass satori, up the staircase of the gods to the Munster, up the rocket launch of an elevator. Burst in on Hector in his sky island, his evil villain mastermind aerie, where I said, enunciating articulately, "Hector, what the fuck."

"What what the fuck?"

"Why were you trying to buy the Met Life tower? What kind of shit was that?"

"No shit, youth. No shit at all. It was just one of a number of bids my people have been making in lower Manhattan recently." He spread his hands in the classic gesture of total innocence. "It's like you've been telling me. It's a great place these days. The SuperVenice. Very nice investment. Nothing but upsides down there. I don't get your dismay here."

"The Met was getting attacked," I said hody. "Your people were sabotaging it to try to scare the residents into selling."

This caused him to frown. "That I didn't know. I'm not sure I believe that."

"It was definitely happening. They've got it tracked to a security firm called R.N.A. Rapid Noncompliance Abatement, very cute fucking name. The Met was noncompliant, and these clowns were rapidly abating us."

"I would never condone something like that," Hector said. "I hope you know me well enough to know that."

I stared at him. I realized that in fact I did not know him anywhere near well enough to know any such thing. He knew that too, so it was a strange thing to say. I had to pause to ponder, and still came up with nothing. Smoke screen in my eyes. He was even smiling a little, perhaps at his little piece of pointing out the thin ice under us.



"Hector," I said slowly, "I know you well enough to know you wouldn't do something that stupid. Not to mention criminal. Joint enterprise laws, right? But you run a big organization, and no doubt you delegate a lot of the ugly parts of real estate work out to various security firms. RNA is just one sucker on that octopus arm. And what they are really like, you can't really be sure about. So there, in that, you are vulnerable, and not doing due diligence, because you are legally responsible for what they do when you hire them. Remember what you used to say when I was working for you? When the people who understand the instruments are divorced from the people who are trading the instruments, bad things can happen. This is just another version of that. You have got people working for you, doing various kinds of dirty work without you knowing about it, and supposedly that keeps you clean, but it's dangerous, because they're idiots. And that makes you, if not an idiot, then at least responsible for idiotic shit. Legally responsible."

He regarded me. "I will take in what you say," he said. "I will make adjustments accordingly. I hope your harsh opinion here won't interfere with our work together on the project you have going in Chelsea."

"We're buying you out of that," I said. "I'll be wiring you your money later today."

"I don't know if you can do that."

"I definitely can. The contract I used was the one we use at Water-Price to keep control of our investors' comings and goings. It's seriously bombproof."

"I see." He nodded, looked at his desk. "I'm sorry you feel that way, but I'm sure we'll go on to work on other things."

"Maybe we will."

"Here, youth—sorry to run out on you, but I really was scheduled to leave. I delayed my departure to talk to you, but my crew is getting antsy. Come on up and see me off."

"Sure."

He led me to a different elevator, a huge freight elevator, big enough to hold I don't know what. Elephants. We went up one or two floors, and got out on the very top of the Munster, where Hector's little skyvillage was tethered. Twenty-one balloons, all prismatic bulbously, straining at the leash to loft away. The round platform underneath them was just

smaller than Hector's office, and mushroom-shaped cottages around the circumference and in the middle were connected by clear tubes like little skybridges. Some kind of beautiful little folly. Lots of people already on board up there cocktail partying, including several at the top of a gangplank stairway, waiting for Hector.

He smiled genially at me, shook my hand. "Good luck to you, youth. We'll meet again in another context."

"No doubt."

He walked up the gangplank, and a crew on the roof rolled it aside. With a final Wizard of Oz wave to me he turned away, and the skyvillage lofted straight up, rose swiftly, and spun off east into the clouds.

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So that was that. Trouble in river city, and a lesson for me going forward: the octopuses have very long arms. And more than eight of them. Maybe they are like giant squids, if squids have more than eight tentacles. It was troubling.

But now I had to get my Charlotte down to D.C. I had arranged for her to get off her last day of work early—last day for the time being, she had told her people, she was just taking a leave of absence, she was not really quitting, she would be back ASAP—and I could imagine her people actually believed this, because I did—sq, I had gotten her to then proceed from her office west to the rebuilt Pier 57, where I would come into the rebuilt marina and pick her up and off we would go, out the Narrows and south. I had stocked the bug for a night at sea if necessary, but I had in mind a marina on the Maryland shore as being easier, after which we would zip up the Chesapeake to Baltimore and I would drop her off at the new harbor's station to hop over to D.C.

Did I hope that Jojo and the rest of the gang would see me picking up our new congressperson representing the Twelfth District of the state of New York to depart down the Hudson and away to the nation's silly capital? Yes, I did. And indeed it turned out as I had hoped, because as I pulled into the marina and lifted my chin to the gang at the bar, Jojo was among them pretending to talk to someone, ostentatiously not looking my way. Our supposed reconciliation and business cooperation pact, enacted at Charlotte's behest, meant nothing to her; this was what her refusal

to look my way conveyed. I saw that, and she saw that I saw it; that's how good people are with sidelong glances and their peripheral vision and their eyes in the backs of their heads. And then Charlotte appeared, walking onto the marina dock, punctual as usual, weighed down by two fat shoulder bags and clumping along with that little limp she has. A solid woman, carelessly curvy, dressed for business; not precisely what you hope to see in a woman's figure. Not that I care about that; I mean not that that's *all* I care about. For instance Jojo had a great figure, sure, very trim and well-proportioned, classic features everywhere, neat and attractive without anything being extravagant, you might say. Neat, fine. And I had liked her, sure, I had been very attracted, and it still hurt that she had given up on me, broke it off with me, whatever that had been. Actually she had ripped off my idea and then accused me of ripping it off from her, and now we would be collaborating as we went forward, maybe that's the way it happens, nothing unusual. Anyway it hurt and I still wanted her, I looked at her with a little clutch in my heart and elsewhere. But on the other hand take Amelia Black, the star of the Met and the cloud and the world; she was over-the-top, not just neat but compelling, not just perfect but interesting; and because for years she had had a professional and/or personal propensity for getting naked on her show, I had not been able to avoid noticing along with the rest of humanity that she also had a spectacular figure, with the extra splashes on a big rangy frame that certainly made for at least part of her popularity, that and her goofy sweet character. And yet I didn't have the slightest interest in her in that way; she didn't have the slightest appeal. Of course I liked to look at her, and she was nice. She had even done good things in our recent little euhanasia-of-the-rentier campaign, wielding the initial bolt clippers to the choke hold they had on our fiscal necks. But I didn't want to spend time with her; I wasn't interested in her. No clutch at heart or elsewhere. As far as I could tell, no offense, she wasn't interesting. Or something. Who knows what these kinds of reactions really come down to. Phetomones we don't consciously detect? Telepathy? Or just a case of being too perfect, too nice?

Charlotte Armstrong was not perfect, or nice. Good but not nice; and good is more important than nice. Grumpy and sharp-edged, and as I said, solid in form. And sixteen fucking years older. Right now I was

thirty-four, which meant she was, oh my God, fifty. Fifty years old! She might as well be eighty!

Okay, big deal. So what. Because she made me laugh. And what's more, I made her laugh. And I wanted to make her laugh. This was becoming something I was trying for, I mean really trying for. I angled what I did to please Charlotte Armstrong, to make her laugh. I looked around for things to do or say that would get that response from her. These days it was my main priority, it seemed.

That being the case, on this afternoon I got the bug up to speed and we lifted off the water and flew like a bird, like that bird called the shearwater, which you sometimes see out on the Atlantic skimming the waves, and which I once heard never lands at all, just lives and sleeps and dies at sea, an idea that I find strangely appealing. Especially when flying in the bug. Which it occurred to me I should christen the *Shearwater*. We shot out the Narrows under the big bridge and in my mind I named it that very moment, in the shadow of the bridge, and we flew.

South along the Jersey shore. And yes, Charlotte laughed. She stood and shuffled to the bow, holding on to the deck lines in a sensible way, and stood up there with her arms outstretched and her hair flying. I smiled and focused on piloting a clean line over the low swells, which were conning in from the east. By paying attention to the swells and veering smoothly to stay on a beam reach along the back of one for as long as possible, then jogging to the left up and over the next one to the east and then staying on that one also for as long as possible, our course came very close to transcending the swell and being a perfectly smooth ride, feeling something like one of the harbor ferries but very much faster. I had no idea if Charlotte was sensitive to the swell or not, but the last thing I wanted now was for her to get seasick. And the truth is that I myself don't have any great stomach for the ocean's up-and-down, be it heavy or slight, so I like to minimize the effect when I can. And there's nothing like the *Shearwater* for doing that, because speed helps, somehow. And today the swell was not that large. So we flew!

After a while she came back to the cockpit and sensibly got in the wind shelter under the glassine half shell. I was in the airflow pocket at the stern, seated and twiddling the wheel with one little finger.

"Champagne?" I suggested.

"You shouldn't drink and drive," she said.  
"You drink for both of us."

"When we land. Or throw anchor. Whatever."  
In the cockpit's air pocket the sound of the motor and the shearing of the foils through the water were all as subdued as the wind. We could talk, and did. The Jersey shore was low and autumnal, not with bright New England colors but more a brown sludgy tone, never very high over the horizon. Possibly the hurricane had ripped all its leaves away too. The East Coast was very obviously a drowned coastline; it had been like that even before the floods, and now more than ever. From our angle it looked like land on this planet was an afterthought.

Charlotte got a call and took it. She glanced at me as she listened, mouthed *Fed Ex* with her hand over the speaker, then nodded as she listened.

"Yeah, I'm on my way down now. By boat. My boatman. Yeah, the captain of my yacht. All congresspeople get a yacht, didn't you know that?"

"No, I know."

"Listen, you said you would need help in Congress. So now I'm there. "No, of course not. But it's not just me. I've been talking around the new members, and there's a lot of them like me. It makes sense, right? Because now's the time."

"I hope you're right. I'll try, sure."

"Shit yes we'll back you. Just keep the president in line and it'll happen. You're the crucial figure in what gets tried. It's fiscal policy."

Then she listened for a long time. After a while she began to roll her eyes at me. She put her finger on her wristpad's microphone. "He's giving me all the reasons he can't do it," she said under her breath. "He's chicken-ing out."

"Tell him the Paulson story," I suggested.

"What do you mean? What about Paulson?"

Quickly and urgently I outlined the story for her. She nodded as I spoke.

When I was done she took her finger off the mike. Suddenly her look was fierce, her tone of voice likewise. She snapped, "Listen, Larry, I understand all that, but it doesn't matter. Do you understand? That doesn't matter. Now's the time for you to be bold and do the right thing. It's your moment, and you don't get to do it over again if you get it wrong. And

people will remember. Do you remember Paulson, Larry? He's remembered as a chicken and a sleaze, because when the whole system was going down he ran up to New York and told his friends he was going to nationalize Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, right after he told everyone else he wasn't going to. So his friends sold their shares while they were still worth something, and everyone else lost big-time. What? Yes, it would have been insider trading if he had had any investments in that stuff himself, but as it was he was just helping his friends. And now that's all he's remembered for. All. Nothing else. Your biggest move is what you get remembered for, Larry. So if it's a bad one, that's it. So fucking do the right thing."

She listened to her ex for a while and then laughed shortly. "Sure, you're welcome. Anytime! Talk to you later. Hang in there and do the right thing." She clicked the phone off and grinned at me, and I grinned back.

"You're tough," I said.

"I am," she said. "And he deserves it. Thanks for the story."

"Seemed like it was time for the stick."

"It was."

"So now you're an advisor to the chair of the Fed!"

"My Fed Ex," she said. "Well, he likes to be able to ignore me. I tell him what to do, he ignores me. It'll be like old times."

"But he's doing what you told him to do this time, right?"

"We'll see. I think he'll do what the situation forces him to do. I'm just clarifying what that is. Actually you are."

"It sounds way better coming from you."

"I don't see why."

"Because you're a realistic person, and he knows that."

"Maybe. He thinks I've gone nuts, grinding in the city as long as I have."

"Which is true, right?"

She laughed. "Yes, it is. Maybe I do want that champagne."

"Good for you."

I checked the ocean ahead and clicked on the autopilot, then went to the hatchway to the cabin, tousling her wild hair very briefly as I passed her. "Someone has to have the ideas," I said down in the cabin.

"I thought that was you," she called down the hatch.

"I did too," I said as I came back up. "But these other ideas you've been

talking about lately don't sound familiar to me. So I'm thinking it's not me. More like Karl Marx."

She snorted. "If only. I think at best it's Keynes. But that's okay. It's a Keynesian world, always has been."

I shrugged. "He was a trader, right?"

She laughed. "I guess everybody's a trader."

"I'm not so sure about that." I unwrapped the foil and wire from the champagne bottle, very old-fashioned, very French, and then aimed the cork to the side and sent it flying to leeward. Poured her a mason jar glass and sipped from it myself before giving it to her.

"Cheers," she said, and clinked her jar to the bottle I was holding.

Then after she had drunk about half her glass, and I was back to steering, or at least supervising the autopilot, she got another call.

"Who's this? Oh! Well, thank you very much. It's a pleasure to hear from you. Yes, I'm really looking forward to it. It's a very exciting time, yes it is."

"Yes, that's right. We were married when we were young, and we're still friends. Yes. He is very good. Yes." She laughed, seeming a bit giddy. I thought the champagne had gone to her head, but then realized who it must be. "Well, he was so brilliant we had to get divorced. Yes, one of those. It was like nuclear fission, or is it fusion. Anyway that was a long time ago. But now we talk, yes. He has the right ideas, I think. Yes, there's a big group of us in the House, and I think in the Senate too. What? The court? Haven't you packed the court already?"

I could hear the laugh coming from her phone, a familiar-sounding soprano cackle.

"Okay, I look forward to meeting you. Thanks again for calling."

She let the phone fall to the bench, stared at the Jersey shore, then out to sea.

"The president?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I thought so. What did she want?"

"Support."

"Of course, but... wow."

She looked at me and smiled. "It may actually get interesting."

Late in the day it got colder and the swell a bit higher, and I let the

Sherrater down and brought it in to shore, looking to spend the night at a marina in Ocean City Bay, where I could recharge the batteries and take off at dawn. The harbormaster radioed to say there was a space in the visitors' slips, so as the sun was going down behind the Maryland shore I puttered in behind the floating seawall and followed the harbormaster's gestures into a slip. She tied off at one cleat, I tied the other, and there we were. Once the battery's charger was plugged in, Charlotte and I walked up to a restaurant with its windows overlooking the marina. The Highway Fifty Terminus. Nice view. I could have barbecued on the boat but didn't want to. This was nicer, and we needed a break, needed the space for a while.

We talked over dinner, not just money and politics, but music and the city. She had been born and brought up in the Lincoln Towers, right on the Hudson. She listened to my stories of Oak Park, Illinois, and we ate seafood on pasta and drank a bottle of white wine. She watched me closely and yet I didn't feel observed or judged. I tried to make it clear that trading had interested me as a puzzle to be solved, a story to be pulled together out of the data. I explained my theory of the screen and its multiple simultaneous genres, giving when taken altogether a glimpse into the global mind. A hive mind.

"Like history," she said as I tried to describe it.

"Yes, but visible on a screen. History as it's happening."

"And quantified, so you can bet on it."

"Yes, that's right. History made into a betting game."

"I guess it always is. But is that good?"

I shrugged. "I used to think so. I enjoyed it as such. But now I'm thinking it has to be more than just something to bet on. With this building project, it's more, I don't know..."

"Making history."

"Maybe so. Making something, anyway."

"Did you get what you wanted when you went up to see Ramirez?"

"Well, I bought him out. And he let me do it. I suppose that was because his security contractors had been breaking the law. I may have burned a bridge there, I don't know. He said we'd be seeing each other again. I don't know what to think of that."

"They won't go away," she said, regarding me with a little smile.

Was I naïve? Did I still have things to learn? Was she regarding me fondly? Yes to all. I felt confused in so many ways. But that look: it made me smile. It shouldn't have but it did. It was a fond look.

When we got up to return to the boat, I felt good. Full; a little tipsy. Listened to. And I too had listened. We walked back down the slipways arm in arm. I turned on the boat's lights and showed her down into the cabin, showed her the two beds tucked into either side of the narrow space down the cabin's middle. Her bags were on the guest bed, and she put them onto the shelf over the bed, dug around and pulled out a bathroom bag and some kind of clothing. I guessed it was her pajamas. She left them on her bed and we went back up to the cockpit and sat under a few stars, fuzzy in the salt air. I had scotch but left it down below; we didn't need it. Heads back on the rail, shoulder to shoulder.

Okay, I liked her. And more than that, I wanted her. Did that mean I was falling for power? Was it really true, then, that power is sexy? I couldn't really buy it, not even then and there, looking at her and feeling that she looked good. Power comes out of the end of a gun, Mao said very cogently, and the end of a gun is not sexy, not if you are a normal person who values your life and thinks of sex as fun and guns as sick and disgusting. No; power is not sexy. But Charlotte Armstrong was sexy.

So but what did that mean? Sixteen years older, holy shit. When I myself was sixty, and hopefully still thoroughly hale and hearty even at that admittedly elderly age, she would be seventy-six years old, ack. An inhuman number. If I got to a lucky seventy, she would be eighty-six and deeply, deeply ancient. Up and down the years, the discrepancy was like a Grand Canyon between us.

But now was now. And by the time we got to that future point, I figured either she would have seen through me and broken up with me, or I would have caught a cancer and died, or more likely she would die and leave me bereft and seeking consolation with some thirty-year-old. I would be like one of those horrible Margaret Mead—Robert Heinlein line marriages and first marry someone way too old for me, then someone way too young. It sounded awful, but what was I going to do? Some people get lucky and partner up with someone the same age, they know the same songs, have the same references and all that, good for them! But for the rest of us it's

catch-as-catch-can. And just thinking of her kicking ass in the nation's dismal swamp was making me laugh. It was going to be funny.

"Come on," I said after a long silence. "Let's go below."

"Why?"

"Why what? You know why. To have sex."

"Sex," she scoffed, as if she didn't believe in it, or had forgotten what it was. But there was a sly little smile tugging up the corners of her mouth, and when I kissed her I learned very quickly that she knew perfectly well what sex was.

## f) Amelia

The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and the beauty in the world.

—F. Scott Fitzgerald

Over New York harbor, a calm spring day, year 2143. Cloudless, visibility forty miles.

Amelia took Stefan and Roberto and Mr. Hexter up in the *Assisted Migration* and ordered Frans to ascend to two thousand feet to have a good look at the bay. Mr. Hexter was excited to be getting to see the city from this marvelous vantage point and planned to take photos for some kind of mapping project he was contemplating. The boys were happy to come along and catch the view, see if any muskrats could be seen from the air.

"I see them all the time," Amelia said. "You'll love the telescopes Frans has on board."

As they made their ascent the boys and Mr. Hexter toured the gondola, with Amelia explaining everything, including the claw marks made by her polar bears, which she could now point at with only a brief plunge into sadness. It was just one of the bad parts of the past. In her campaigns on behalf of animals and habitat corridors she had experienced many reversals, and witnessed a lot of suffering, and often death. Now, as she drew her hands down the scratch marks and showed how the bears must have fallen down the suddenly vertical hallways, she could put that foolish moment in context. Category: Amelia's Dumb Moves, Extrinsication From. It was a big category. It was not that particular moment that had been the bad one.

"Let's have lunch," she said after the boys and Mr. Hexter had marveled.

They gathered in the glass-bottomed bow of the gondola and looked down at the city as they ate tofu burgers that Amelia had prepared on her kitchen stove.

"How many miles have you traveled in this thing?" Mr. Hexter asked.

"I think it's a million now," Amelia said.

She asked Frans, and the airship's calm Germanic voice said, "We have traversed one million, two hundred thousand and eighteen miles together."

Hexter whistled briefly. "That's like fifty times around the world, if you were going around the equator. So it must have been more times than that."

"I think so. I've lived up here for a long time. It's kind of like my little skyvillage. A sky cottage, I guess you'd call it. There were some years when I didn't come down at all."

"Like the baron in the trees," Hexter said.

"Who was that?"

"A young baron who climbed into the forest in Italy, and never came back to the ground again for his whole life. Supposedly."

"Well, I did that too. For a few years."

"Years?"

"That's right. Something like, I don't know, seven years."

Hexter and the boys stared at her.

"You stayed up here alone for seven years?" Hexter said.

Amelia nodded, feeling herself blush.

"Why?" Roberto asked.

She shrugged and blushed more. "I was never really sure. I wanted to get away. I guess I didn't really like people. Some bad things had happened, and I just wanted to get away. So I did, and then I started doing the assisted migration stuff, and I found I could talk to people from up here, in ways that made them seem okay. I got used to talking to people again from doing it up here in the cloud, and then one time I came through New York, and the mooring at the Met was available, and I met with Vlade, up in the cupola, and I liked him. I felt comfortable around him. So then it went on from there."

The guys contemplated this story:

"Does Vlade know the part he played in reeling you in?" Mr. Hexter asked.

"No, I don't think so. He knows we're friends. But people—I don't know. They think I'm more normal than I really am. They don't really see me."

"We see you," Roberto declared.

"Yes, you do."

They talked about animals she had seen. She had a list somewhere, she said, but she didn't want to get into that. "Let's look for new ones now."

They floated over the city. It was in every direction a great sheet of water, with some giant stricklebacked sea serpents ceiling around the bay: Manhattan, Hoboken, Brooklyn Heights, Staten Island. Land lay in the distance everywhere, green and flat, except to the south, where the Atlantic gleamed like a dull old mirror.

"Look," the old man said as he peered through one of the telescopes.

"I think I see a pod of porpoises. Or could they be orcas, do you think?"

"I don't think orcas come in the harbor," Amelia said.

"But they look so big!"

"They do, don't they. But we're pretty low. Maybe they're river dolphins, I know some were introduced here from China to try to keep them from going extinct."

Cetacean backs in the water, smooth and supple, hard to figure because of their black-and-white striping. About twenty of them, rising to the surface and blowing like whales.

"Mr. Hexter, I think they're Melville's whales! They've come to get him!"

"Good idea," Hexter said, smiling.

As they hummed north over the Hudson they could see that the waterline of the Jersey shore was still a bit icy.

"Shores like that are where we'll have the best chance to see beaver or muskrat homes," Hexter said, peering through his telescope. "Scan the shore there."

The boys did that for a while, then looked through the telescopes down at the city. The docks were mostly back, centripeting Manhattan's shores. The uprown towers flared emerald, lemon, turquoise, indigo. "Where's your marsh?" Amelia asked.

"There by that skinny tall building," Roberto said.

"Oh that skinny tall building!"

"Sorry. The purple one. Right east of it. It used to be a creek there, called Mother David's Valley. It should make a good salt marsh, with maybe a couple of Mr. Garr's raft buildings on it to study it and take care of it."

"I'm glad you're doing that. But don't you have to be an adult to own property?"

"I don't know. Anyway we're a holding company."

"I thought you were an institute," Mr. Hexter said.



"You're in it too! That's right. The Institute for Manhattan Animal Studies."

"I thought it was the Institute of Stefan and Roberto," Hexter said.

"That's just what you call it. I wanted to call it the Institute for Homeless Animals, but I got outvoted."

"That's because animals always *have* homes," Stefan explained again.

"So is it true that these towers are mostly occupied now?" Amelia asked, diverting them from what looked to be an ongoing dispute.

"I heard that they are," Mr. Hexter said. "The new absentee tax is pretty persuasive. Between that and the capital assets taxes, they're either being occupied or sold to people who will occupy them. And I think a new city law requires low-income housing in all of them. Even the mayor is jumping on that bandwagon. I read that one floor of the Cloister cluster can be turned into rooms that house six hundred people."

"How do they add plumbing for that many?"

"That must be all those exterior pipes."

"They look silly."

"I like them. There was something dreadful about those towers, their line was too clean. Better to add a little texture. More New York."

"More sewage!"

"Exactly my point."

"I like the clean lines," Amelia said. "New York has always had clean lines."

From their height, the people crowding the uptown sidewalks and plazas were the size of small ants. There's was a plentiful species.

"Can there really be enough apartments for all those people?" Amelia asked.

Hexter shook his head. "A lot of them come in for the day, just like always."

"But a lot of them must live there too."

"Sure. Packed in like sardines, as they say. Like clams in a clam bed."

"I wonder why. I mean, it's good for the animals that people want to do it, but why? Why do people want it?"

"It's exciting, right?"

Amelia shook her head. "I can never get it."

"You still like your blimp."

"It's true. You can see why."

"It's very nice. Are you headed out soon on another trip?"

"I think so. The Householders' Union is asking me to make some kind of world tour. I'm just hoping it won't lead to more trouble."

"Angry landlords taking potshots at you?"

"Well yeah! I'm getting a lot of hate mail. I don't like it. I wish I'd just stuck to animals, sometimes. It was easier then. I mean there was hate mail then too, but mostly from people who don't like assisted migration, or animals, so I just ignored them. But now it's people who, I don't know."

"It's just landlords and their lackeys," Hexter said. "Ignore them too. You're doing great. You're making a difference."

Amelia asked Frans to head south just offshore from Manhattan, and they regarded the city in silence as they turned and floated by it.

Mr. Hexter pointed down at Morningside Heights. "It's strange," he said. "Down there is where the big riot last year happened, right? The battle for the towers. But it was also the crux of the battle for New York, during the Revolutionary War. The United States could have died before it was born, right down there, if it weren't for that one."

"What happened?" Roberto asked.

"It was early in the revolution. Washington's army was being chased all over the bay by the British, who had lots of Hessian mercenaries in about a hundred warships. The Americans were nothing but farmers with fowling guns and rowboats. So wherever the British landed, the Americans had to run away. First from Staten Island to Brooklyn. Then when the Brits followed them to Brooklyn, the whole American army rowed across the East River one night in a fog. But then they were down in the Battery, where the town was in those days, and the British crossed the East River at midtown. They could have marched across the island and cut the Americans off and forced them to surrender, but their general Howe was extremely slow. He was so slow that people have wondered if he was trying to lose, so the Tories would be embarrassed back in Parliament, because he was a Whig. Anyway the Americans took advantage of this syrup-head and snuck up Broadway one night, past the Brits who were camped around the UN building, and they reconvened up here at the north end of the island."

"They snuck up Broadway?"

"It was just a country lane. They even lost it and snuck through the



woods. It was a dark night and it was all forest then. So anyway the Americans made it up to here and then the British followed them north. This time they had the Americans caught at the north end of the island, and they marched up here to crush them, but as they were attacking their buglers blew a fox hunting call, and that made some of the Americans mad. A group of riflemen from Marblehead Massachusetts stood their ground right down there, and started to shoot back. It was first time Americans had stood up to the Brits since Bunker Hill, and they fought them to a draw during the course of a long and bloody day. Right down there!"

"Cool," Roberto said. "So then they won?"

"No, they lost! I mean they were still going to get crushed, it was just a holding action for a day. So they slipped off the island again. They rowed over to Jersey and got away, and the British held Manhattan for the rest of the war. Remember the Headquarters map, remember the *Hissar*? All that happened after this battle we lost."

"So what the hell?" Roberto said. "How did we win the revolution if we kept losing all the battles and running away?"

"That was the story of the war," Mr. Hexter said. "The Americans lost all the battles but won the war. Because when they lost they were still here. It was their home. They would go off and regroup, and the British would follow them and beat on them again somewhere else. There were a couple American victories along the way, but mostly not. Mostly the British won, but even so they eventually wore down, and in the end the Americans surrounded them and kicked them out. The Brits were going to run out of food, so they left."

He stared down at Morningside Heights, thinking it over. "I wonder if it's always like that, you know? This battle for the towers, the fight we're having now over money. All this that we're seeing. You just keep losing until you win."

"I don't get it," said Roberto.

"Me neither," Mr. Hexter admitted. "I guess the idea is that since you're the ones who live here, you just wear them down. Something like that. It's like a Pyrrhic victory in reverse. I guess you could call it a Pyrrhic defeat. I never thought about the losers of a Pyrrhic victory before. I mean those people are really the winners, right? They lose, then they say to each other, 'Hey we just lost a Pyrrhic victory! Congratulations!'"

Roberto supposed it might be better just to win outright.

Then they were past the Lincoln Towers, and floating over the big roofs of the Jarvis Center, and finally over the intertidal, where the new platform rafts were now floating in place, each the size of a city block. A stretch of tiny black gondolas tied to a line of tall poles seemed to suggest that the westernmost platform was to serve as a kind of San Marco Square, facing the Hudson. All the blocks were clearly going to have farms on their roofs. Very New York, Mr. Hexter remarked, these little farms. He had once had a friend who gardened in her apartment using thimbles and toothpaste tube caps for pots, toothpicks for tools, an eyedropper for watering. She had grown individual blades of grass.

"Isn't that where you used to live?" Amelia inquired, pointing down.

"Yes, right there. Thirty-first and Seventh, see it? It's all gone now. It was right in the middle of this redevelopment."

"So do you want to move back there when they've fixed it up?"

"Oh no. That was just where I washed up when I lost my place before. It wasn't very nice. In fact it was a shithole. If it weren't for these boys I would have died there. So now I'll go wherever they go!" He laughed at them. "You're always stuck with the people you save. You might as well learn that one now. I won't burden you too long anyway, and you'll have learned the lesson."

"We like having you around," Stefan ventured.

"What about you guys?" Amelia asked. "Will you move up to your salt marsh?"

"Don't know," Roberto said uneasily. "Charlotte wants us to house-sit her room while she's in Washington. But it's too small for two people, and she'll be back a lot, so we don't know what we'll do. Maybe get on the list for a different room at the Met. I don't want to move uptown. And I don't want to be off the water."

"Me neither," Stefan said.

"Well good," Amelia said. "We'll all be neighbors for a while more. So hey, do you guys want to go with me on a trip? Around the world in eighty days?"

Stefan and Roberto and Mr. Hexter looked at each other.

"Yes," they said.

The city is a built dream, a vision incarnated. What makes it grow is its image of itself.

—Peter Conrad

The place where all the aspirations of the world meet to form one vast master aspiration, as powerful as the suction of a steam dredge.

—H. L. Mencken

But why say more?

—Herman Melville

## g) the citizen

Popped bubble, liquidity freeze, credit crunch, big finance going down like the KT asteroid, making desperate appeals for a government bailout: it was like the revival of some bad old Broadway musical. Book goes like this: finance says to government, Pay us or the economy dies. Congress, assuming its paymasters on Wall Street know what they're talking about, because it concerns the incomprehensible mysteries of finance, agrees to fork it over. Standard practice, precedent well established, and since government debt is already gigantic, just a case of more. Of course it means no new or old public programs will be affordable, and will require that austerity measures be tightened yet further, which will hamstring government completely, but this is just a matter of balancing the nation's checkbook and simple common sense.

Same as always! But a new Congress arrived in January 2143, riding a wave of feeling that this crash should be different. Plans were in the air, hot words were in the air. Thus in February 2143, Federal Reserve chair Lawrence Jackman and the secretary of the treasury, both of course veterans of Wall Street, met with the big banks and investment firms, all massively overleveraged, all crashing, and they outlined a bailout offer amounting to four trillion dollars, to be given on condition that the recipients issue shares to the Treasury equivalent in value to whatever aid they accepted. The rescues being necessarily so large, Treasury would then become their majority shareholder and take over accordingly. Earlier shareholders would be given haircuts; debt holders would become equity holders. Depositors would be protected in full. Future profits would go to the U.S. Treasury in proportion to the shares it held. If at some point the recipients of aid wanted to buy back Treasury's shares, the deals could be reevaluated.

In other words, as a condition of bailout: nationalization.

Oh, the tortured shrieks of outraged dismay. Goldman Sachs refused the deal. Treasury promptly declared it insolvent and arranged a last-minute fire sale of it to Bank of America, just as it had arranged the sale of Merrill Lynch a century before. After that, Treasury and the Fed offered any other company refusing their help good luck in their bankruptcy proceedings.

A lot of capital flight might have been occurring at this point, but the central banks of the European Union, Japan, Indonesia, India, and Brazil were also making salvation-by-nationalization offers to their own distressed finance industries. It wasn't clear that being nationalized by any of these other countries would be a better deal for fleeing capital—if there was even any capital left to flee, given the tendency of “paper to vapor” in such moments of panic. Meanwhile China's central bank officials politely observed that state intervention in private finance was often quite useful. They had achieved mostly good results with it over the last three or four thousand years, and they suggested that possibly state control of the economy was better than the reverse situation. March would see in the Year of the Rabbit, and rabbits of course are very productive!

Finally Citibank took the deal offered by Treasury and Fed, and in rapid order all the other banks and investment firms also took the deal. Finance was now for the most part a privately operated public utility.

Encouraged by this victory of state over finance, Congress became a little giddy and in short order passed a so-called Piketty tax, a progressive tax levied not just on incomes but on capital assets. Asset tax levels ranged from zero for assets less than ten million dollars to twenty percent on assets of one billion or more. To prevent capital from fleeing to tax havens, a capital flight penalty was also made law, with a top rate set at the famous Eisenhower-era ninety-one percent. Capital flight stopped, the law held, and nation-states everywhere felt even more empowered. Among the changes they quickly enacted at the WTO were tight currency controls, increased labor support, and environmental protections. The neoliberal global order was thus overturned right in its own wheelhouse.

These new taxes and the nationalization of finance meant the U.S. government would soon be dealing with a healthy budget surplus. Universal health care, free public education through college, a living wage, guaranteed full employment, a year of mandatory national service, all these were not only made law but funded. They were only the most promi-

ment of many good ideas to be proposed, and please feel free to add your own favorites, as certainly everyone else did in this moment of we-the-peopleism. And as all this political enthusiasm and success caused a sharp rise in consumer confidence indexes, now a major influence on all market behavior, ironically enough, bull markets appeared all over the planet. This was intensely reassuring to a certain crowd, and given everything else that was happening, it was a group definitely in need of reassurance. That making people secure and prosperous would be a good thing for the economy was a really pleasant surprise to them. Who knew?

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Note that this flurry of social and legal change did not happen because of Representative Charlotte Armstrong of the Twelfth District of the State of New York, also known as “Red Charlotte,” admirable woman and congressperson though she was. Nor was it because of her ex, Lawrence Jackman, chair of the Federal Reserve Bank during the months of the crisis, nor because of the president herself, much praised and excoriated though she was for her course of bold and persistent experimentation in the pursuit of happiness during a time of crisis. Nor was it due to any other single individual. Remember: ease of representation. It's always more than what you see, bigger than what you know.

That said, people in this era did do it. Individuals make history, but it's also a collective thing, a wave that people ride in their time, a wave made of individual actions. So ultimately history is another particle/wave duality that no one can parse or understand.

Moving on from this brief excursion into political philosophy before the profundity grows too deep, what remains to be said is this: things happened. History happened. It does not stop happening. Seemingly frozen moments are transient, they break up like the spring ice, and then change occurs. So: individuals, groups, civilization, and the planet itself all did these things, in actor networks of all kinds. Remember not to forget, if your head has not already exploded, the nonhuman actors in these actor networks. Possibly the New York estuary was the prime actor in all that has been told here, or maybe it was bacterial communities, expressing themselves through their own civilizations, what we might call bodies.

But again, enough with the philosophy! And please do not because

of this quick list of transient political accomplishments conclude that this account is meant to end all happy-happy, with humanity's problems wrapped up in a gift box accompanied by a Hallmark card and flowers. Why would you think that, knowing what you know? This story is about New York, not Denver, and the city is as ruthless as an otter. Its stories will always convey that awful New York mix of hypocritical sentimentality and stone-cold ambition. So sure, a leftward flurry of legislation got LBJed through Congress in 2143, but there was no guarantee of permanence to anything they did, and the pushback was ferocious as always, because people are crazy and history never ends, and good is accomplished against the immense black-hole gravity of greed and fear. Every moment is a wicked struggle of political forces, so even as the intertidal emerges from the surf like Venus, capitalism will be flattening itself like the octopus it biomimics, sliding between the glass walls of law that try to keep it contained, and no one should be surprised to find it can squeeze itself to the width of its beak, the only part of it that it can't squish flatter, the hard part that tears at our flesh when it is free to do so. No, the glass walls of justice will have to be placed together closer than the width of an octopus's beak—now there's a fortune cookie for you! And even then the octopus may think of some new ways to bite the world. A hinged beak, some super suckers, who knows what these people will try.

So no, no, no, no! Don't be naïve! There are no happy endings! Because there are no endings! And possibly there is no happiness either! Except perhaps in some odd chance moment, dawn in the clean washed street, midnight out on the river, or more likely in the regarding of some past time, some moment encased in a cyst of nostalgia, glimpsed in the rearview mirror as you fly away from it. Could be happiness is always retrospective and probably therefore made up and even factually wrong. Who knows. Who the fuck knows. Meanwhile get over your childlike Rocky Mountain desire for a happy ending, because it doesn't exist. Because down there in Antarctica—or in other realms of being far more dangerous—the next buttress of the buttress could go at any time.

Over the next few hours, the skyline vista suggests, we will follow one such story—but we might well have turned to some other window and there found another, equally interesting story to watch. Next time, perhaps. There are, the skyline proposes, millions of stories to choose from—a whole city of stories, all proceeding at once, whether we happen to see them or not.

—James Sanders, *Celluloid Skyline: New York and the Movies*