

THE CALL

An old man packing his bags.

Hard not to read the situation metaphorically, Joan commented in his head.

Noah corrected her: not old. He was only seventy-nine, till next Monday. When he'd been young, your seventies had counted as old, but not these days. Say, youngish up to sixty; then middle-aged, or young-old, through the sixties and seventies. Ancient Romans used to distinguish between *senectus* (still lively) and *decrepitus* (done for). Sharp as ever, hale, hearty—surely Noah could still count himself in the *senectus* camp?

And these were only literal bags he was packing—well, one slim carry-on and his leather satchel. Also, his destination was neither heaven nor hell. Though the mention of Nice, or the French Riviera, or the South of France generally, did make people roll their eyes in envy, especially in a New York February.

Noah was going to Nice for his eightieth. He hadn't been since he was four. There'd been nothing pulling him back to his hometown; after all, he didn't know anyone in that part of the world, not since his grandfather had died in 1944. That had freed his mother (Margot) to join his father (Marc) and little Noah in the States. (He'd still been Noé, then.)

Noah folded another shirt. He wasn't flying out for another three days, but he liked to get his packing done early, to leave

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time for last-minute chores. Meticulous, he found each balled pair of socks its nook.

He'd never been a keen traveler—because of his rather yanked-about childhood, he supposed. Going to American Chemical Society meetings, all he'd cared about was whether he'd find himself stuck with the graveyard shift (8 a.m. on Sunday) for his paper on, say, polyvinyl-chloride fibers. He'd accompanied Joan on most of her work trips, though as the decades went by she'd started turning down all the invitations she could, everything but the most prestigious keynotes; she recoiled from the prospect of extra nights in hotels. She and Noah had never vacationed much, either. When Joan wasn't in the lab or on the road, she liked to be at home, buried in a novel, Miles Davis on the record player. Or dropping into sleep in their bed (double; queen was too wide). Back to back, her leathery soles touching Noah's.

I miss that too, Joan said.

Which was nonsense, of course, because there was no Joan to miss anything anymore: no soles, no souls. These remarks of hers were generated by Noah's brain, using their not-quite-forty years of marriage as an algorithm. A neurological tic.

Was that five pairs of socks or six? He counted them again.

For the past nine years, on his own, Noah had kept himself too busy for vacations. There'd been hints that he should retire, of course; barbed remarks from colleagues, cost-cutting ones from the dean, benevolent ones from women friends, to the effect that Noah should learn to kick back, live a little, join a choir or take up tai chi in Central Park. His little sister, Fernande, was the only one who'd never suggested it, even though she'd retired from her receptionist job with relief at sixty-five. She must have guessed that her widowed brother needed to stay tethered to the surface of the earth. Having classes to teach—the hard slog of preparation and performance and marking—had reassured him of that much.

Noah supposed what had finally nudged him over the line was his imminent birthday. *Professor in his late seventies* sounded rather admirable, but *professor in his eighties*? He'd had no intention of carrying on long enough to end up a laughingstock. Students were harder to impress since the turn of the millennium; they sat there with their external brains, their little screens, ready to fact-check you if you fumbled a formula.

No, it was better to call a halt before the first time Noah's wits deserted him at a podium. *Retired*, though; the moribund ring of the word. But then, it had been only a month. Of course he'd have plenty to do. Who could be bored in New York City? It was just a matter of picking how to spend his days. He'd declined the title of *professor emeritus*; pottering around campus doing a little independent research struck him as pathetic. If Noah was going to study, it would be some quite new subject. Or a hobby; he was sure he'd come across something of interest. He just had to find his feet. His first venture was this trip.

Once he'd zipped up his case, he went to fetch the recycling tub from the kitchen and carried it into the spare room. This had been his and Joan's home office, but after her death the sight of it had weighed on him, and really he'd preferred to work on campus, so he'd turned it into a guest room. Though now Noah couldn't remember who his last guest had been. The double bed was always made up, as if ready for a visitor; tidier that way. Several times Joan's friend Vivienne had suggested he invite a refugee to move in, but Noah couldn't face housing some stranger.

He knelt to tug Fernande's boxes from under the bed. Only three left to deal with; just personal papers. (He found objects more troubling.) The Swedes had a word for when you spared your family by tidying up your own stuff in advance—Noah couldn't call up the syllables, but it meant “death cleaning.” It had been Margot who'd sorted Marc's effects. (Did you have to be dead for your belongings to be called that, he wondered?)

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Fernande had done it in turn for Margot, and then for her own husband, Dan, and she'd helped her brother after he'd lost Joan, too, though Joan had been so ruthless about clutter (tossing Christmas cards on the first of January) that there hadn't been much to do. So Fernande's death last year was the first time Noah had been given this task to do alone. He was nearly done, he promised himself as he sat on the edge of the bed.

Hospital invoices, her powers of attorney, Living Will and DNR—irrelevant now. Recipes, postcards, photos, appeals from charities, offers from The Great Courses—recycle them all. It was odd to be disposing of the remnants of a younger sister's life, when logically Noah should have gone before her. Deciding what to keep for sentimental reasons was tricky because there was no one left but Noah. The knack, he'd found over the past year, was to keep sentimentality at bay; to ask, about each item, *Does anyone need or want this?* until at rare intervals a real feeling flooded over the levee.

This afternoon he found himself saying yes to just three items: the wedding menu from 1982 (Prawn Cocktail, Chicken Vol-au-Vents, Profiteroles); a photo of Fernande in 1990, wild-eyed with bliss after her home birth, a newborn Victor on her chest (those eyelashes!); and a curling sheaf of comic haiku she'd made up for everyone at the Thanksgiving table in 2002. A postwar baby with chipmunk cheeks, Fernande had always had a warmth and lightness foreign to Noah, eight years her senior.

Clippings from magazines, straight into the recycling. Letters in handwriting Noah couldn't make out, Get Well Soon cards...let it all go. What did a life add up to—Fernande's, anyone's? The papers were almost overflowing the tub. Like leaves, he told himself grimly; grow, shed, rot, repeat.

The minute Noah was done, he was going to treat himself to a cognac as well as a cigarette. (The third of his never-more-than-seven a day.)

Just as he tossed a copy of *Marie Claire* from August 1992, his fingers sensed an odd stiffness. He leaned over to pick it out of the tub. Tucked in the middle, a rigid mailer with nothing written on it—cardboard on one side, brown paper (softened by years) on the other. August 1992: that was the month after Margot's death. The envelope felt empty till Noah slid his fingers in. He recognized the sharp edges. Photographs.

He tugged them out, pulse thumping just in case they were Père Sonne's. Half a dozen or so, black and white, clearly old from the format (two and a half inches by three and a half, he'd guess). From the clothes, hair, and general aesthetic they looked 1930s, '40s maybe. Mostly taken in the street; the setting plausibly though not definitively Nice. Noah polished his fingerprints off the top one (a dandyish man with a cane, caught in profile). But as he leafed through the photos—nine in total—disappointment came fast. None of these bore Père Sonne's stamp. Besides, they were no good.

Slipshod, unilluminating. A Belle Époque building, for instance, cropped at the fourth floor. An awkward close-up of a box, rectangular, inscribed with a circle, a dash on each side. This stock scene of a middle-aged couple on a bench, seen from behind. A woman with coiled hair, again from the rear—was that angle in vogue at the time, he wondered, the equivalent of pursed-lip selfies today? A shot of children's feet trotting by was cute in a generic way. Tree roots, not even particularly well framed. None of the subjects was looking at the camera apart from one smiling boy with neatly combed dark hair who had to be small Noé, though Noah didn't quite recognize himself.

He had to assume it was his mother who'd taken all these. But she must have known better, after decades working with—for—under—her mighty father. Surely she would have borrowed Père Sonne's superb Contax, or even one of his little portable Leicas. This shot of an empty street, for instance—had she meant to press the shutter just then?

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No commercial studio's stamp on the backs, only jotted letters in two cases: *MZ* for the woman seen from behind, *RJ* for little Noah. (Unless it was *R.J.*, a pair of initials? In which case the boy wasn't Noah at all.) That meant Margot must have printed them herself, in the reeking darkroom in their apartment near the Cours Saleya.

He couldn't think of anyone else's brain to pick about this but Vivienne's. Besides, he'd owed her a call for months.

"Excited for your big trip?"

"I suppose." Noah often caught a faint whiff of the patronizing in Vivienne's tone; a hint of the kindergarten teacher. She wouldn't have been his choice, as a friend—nor vice versa, he supposed. They'd inherited each other from Joan, who'd been Vivienne's best friend ever since they'd seized on each other as the two Jews in first grade in their tony New York girls' school in 1942. "How are your people?"

"The kids and so forth?" she asked.

Noah knew that Vivienne's great-granddaughter in Texas was starting ballet, her grandchildren there and in Oregon were doing postgraduate degrees, and her grown kids in New Jersey and Tel Aviv were going through the minor health indignities of their fifties. "No, actually I was thinking of the Sudanese in your spare room."

"Oh, the Abdullahs are Yemenis. They're fine, more than fine—they're pregnant."

Noah rolled his eyes. If the couple raised a child in Vivienne's apartment, would that give them squatters' rights? Well, let the bank worry about that; she'd reverse-mortgaged the place and was spending the proceeds on her pet causes. (She'd always been a do-gooder—the polar opposite of Joan, whose research was of such clear importance that she'd felt entitled to be selfish in her time off.) Noah occasionally warned Vivienne to keep enough for paying strangers to wipe her butt in the end, but she insisted, on

the basis of extensive genealogical research, that no one in her gene pool made it past eighty-five.

He remembered what he was calling about. “The thing is, I’ve found these old photos in the last box of Fernande’s stuff—”

Even if Vivienne had been right here in the hall with Noah, he’d have had to describe them, as she was legally blind. (She’d announced it last year, in an email so perky as to sound proud.) Losing her sight in her early eighties had barely slowed the woman down. She used software that read aloud whatever was on her screen; she’d had the tech guy set it to “Male Australian” to remind her of Frank.

Noah did his best to summarize the images, leafing through them awkwardly with one hand.

“Doesn’t everyone have some crappy photos—lots of them?”

“But why would my mother have bothered taking these—early ’40s, I’m guessing, when she was still in Nice, without me and my father—and printing them, and holding on to them till the end of her days? Then she gave them to my sister, or more likely just left them in a drawer. And why didn’t Fernande mention them to me?”

“No names at all?” Vivienne asked.

“Just what look like initials on the backs of two.”

“Well, you might spot some of the locations when you’re in Nice. As for the human subjects, maybe try the public library. They’ll have some kind of local history collection. If you find any names, give me a shout.”

Vivienne was in touch with distant cousins all over the world, having subscribed to various databases and sent off a saliva swab to a lab. Noah supposed a sense of tribe was crucial if you’d lost your parents. (Her father in the Holocaust, her mother in its long aftermath.) Just when Vivienne’s sight had started really failing, she’d gone off to stay with a family in Spain who’d turned out not to be related to her at all, but she had no regrets; said it was very jolly.

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Some kind of beeper went off at her end now. “I must hang up, my group’s phone-bombing Congress about the Muslim ban.”

“OK,” Noah said, “enjoy.”

He knew Vivienne would rise to that. “It’s not about enjoyment, it’s *tikkun olam*.”

Repairing the world, the Jewish obligation. “I know. I’m only ribbing you.”

Noah was eating his usual poached egg on an English muffin in the kitchen when the phone rang. Vivienne again, with further tips?

Jangle jangle. *She can leave a message*, Joan advised, though she’d always answered, herself. (Before personalized ringtones, the two friends had used a signal to identify themselves: call once, hang up, then call back.)

Not many people but fundraisers and telemarketers bothered Noah at home these days. If it wasn’t Vivienne, this call would probably turn out to be a recording or a robot. Fernande had been in the habit of calling her brother for chats at random intervals—to cheer him up, he suspected. But now, why was he still paying monthly fees on the thing? (A *landline*, that was the modern word—like a skinny root anchoring a tree to the earth.) That was how the corporations made their money: our mindless, lifelong habits.

Jangle jangle. He hurried down the narrow hall to stop the clamor.

“Noah Selvaggio?” The woman pronounced it uncertainly but more or less accurately.

“That’s me. But if you’re selling something—”

“You’re the uncle of Victor Pierre Young?”

That familiar dread. What was it this time, old debts? Crimes, unpunishable now? “My nephew died more than a year ago.” It hurt Noah’s throat to say it.

“I’m aware of that, sir. This is Rosa Figueroa from the

Administration for Children’s Services. I’m contacting you in connection with Michael Young.”

“Oh.”

“Excuse me?”

“I just said *Oh*,” Noah told her foolishly. What must the child be now—nine, ten? He reckoned the years: eleven, actually. How word of the pregnancy had appalled Fernande and Dan: Victor making such a blunder, when he was still an angel-faced teenage boy. The woman was still talking, but none of it was making sense to Noah. “I’m sorry, Ms.—” Her name would come back to Noah in a moment, once he stopped grasping for it.

“Figuroa. Rosa Figuroa,” she repeated in the too-clear enunciation middle-aged people used with those who were past middle age.

“Could you back up for a moment?”

“I’m exploring Michael’s kinship resources,” she told him.

Had Noah misunderstood—was this some kind of genealogy project, then?

“He’s been living with Ella Davis, his grandmother, but she’s just passed.”

For a moment he thought she meant something like an exam, and then he got it. “I’m very sorry to hear that.” To fill the silence: “What was it that . . .”

“Complications of diabetes. She was only sixty-three.”

That made seventy-nine sound like the height of luck to Noah.

“And her husband died back in the ’90s,” Rosa Figuroa added. “So now we’re looking for somewhere for Michael.”

Noah was at a loss as to how he came into this. “Why is he not with, ah,”—Angela? Amanda?—“Amber?”

“She’s currently incarcerated.”

He groaned inwardly. “For what?”

“I wonder, could we focus on the child’s immediate needs, Mr. Selvaggio?”

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Noah cleared his throat. “I’m just racking my brains as to how I can be of any assistance to you. I’ve never met any of these people, myself. My sister died soon after Victor, and her husband, ah, a long time before that.” Dan had lasted long enough to have a pretty good idea of what kind of son he’d raised—*incorrigible*, that was the word people used to throw around. But too early to know that Victor would soon follow him, which was a small mercy, and one not granted to Fernande.

“Yes, sir, that’s exactly why I’m getting in touch. You appear to be the last of Michael’s kin here in New York City.”

That old-fashioned word again. Kith and kin, kinsfolk, kindred; like something out of J. R. R. Tolkien. Did she mean legally or genetically? In what sense could you really be kin to someone you’d never met?

“Mr. Selvaggio?”

This social worker couldn’t be thinking of bringing the child here, to Noah’s apartment.

No. It struck him that, like so many other seniors, he was the target of a phone scam. The woman had gotten hold of the names of relatives of his, for some equivalent of the Spanish Prisoner trick—the Nigerian fortune constantly being offered in illiterate emails.

Put down the phone, Joan told him.

“Sorry not to be of more use, Ms. Figueroa”—no trouble remembering the name the crook had given, now, if he took a split second to get the vowels in the correct sequence—“but I’ve got to go now.”

“Please.”

It wasn’t the word but Rosa Figueroa’s tone that made Noah pause, receiver halfway to the cradle. She did sound like a real person, and so weary. “It’s just that I don’t see how I can be of any practical help,” he told her. “Certainly not in the immediate... I’m off to France next week, as it happens. Maybe after I get back we could speak again.”

AKIN

“This can’t wait. I met Michael for the first time myself this morning. There’s nobody at all to look after him.”

It wasn’t subtle, how she was playing on Noah’s sympathies. He wanted a cigarette.

“Could you come and meet his mother with me, tomorrow morning?”

“But—”

“Let’s all just sit down and put our heads together, all right, to see what can be done for this child?”

Noah sighed.

Noah smoked as he leaned out the kitchen window—a waste of heat, yes, but these apartment buildings stayed so baking from October to April you couldn’t survive without opening a window once in a while.

Incarcerated. Was Amber Davis just as much of a fuckup as his nephew had been? Possibly more so. Hadn’t she been a grown woman (though not quite old enough for it to have counted as statutory rape) when she’d gotten the lanky, lovely fifteen-year-old into her bed and conceived this unfortunate Michael?

Noah was trying to get the sequence straight. Victor’s adolescence had had such a disastrous domino effect it was hard to remember the order and duration of each awful event. He was pretty sure that word of the baby had come after Victor’s truncated stay in that so-called therapeutic school upstate (which had almost bankrupted Fernande and Dan before getting shut down) and after he’d run away from their house in Brooklyn for the second time, with Fernande’s jewelry and a checkbook. She’d gotten her gold back, but it had been melted into a lump. The judge had placed Victor in a group home, then, but he’d run away from that too. Always minor-league stuff, but it added up: possession of marijuana, Ritalin, loitering, trespass, disorderly conduct...

What Noah couldn’t remember was, had Michael been born

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before or after the Limited Secure Placement? Fernande and Dan had been encouraged to call that his *group home* too, though the fence was of razor wire this time. (Orwellian, the dialect of the justice system.) Noah had visited twice, on his own; Joan had always been busy. The place was just two subway stops from the elegant brownstone where Victor had grown up, but a world away.

Then when he'd been let out after ten months, the boy had "crashed with friends." Noah had never gotten the impression his nephew was actually living with the young woman and their son. Fernande—more than Dan—had badgered Victor to let them meet their grandchild, but he'd been elusive. When she'd asked if they could send baby clothes, he'd asked for money instead. And then at seventeen, for something petty—violating parole by skipping school?—Victor had been sent off to juvie, a hellhole of a residential center up near Albany. That fence had been sixteen feet high, Noah remembered from his single visit. Victor had come back with kidney damage from a beating.

From that point on, all Noah had heard about his nephew's doings had come via Fernande. She and Dan had managed to meet the mother and child a couple of times; she'd reported that Victor was "quite involved," though Noah didn't know what that meant: changing diapers? Paying support? Noah had seen a few photos and nodded dutifully. He couldn't remember what the little boy had looked like, now, except that he hadn't inherited Victor's looks.

He stood up, stubbed out his cigarette, and tugged the old window shut. He could have made more of an effort with his nephew, he supposed. But it had all felt like such a goddamn waste of breath.

The moment that stuck in Noah's memory like a sliver was when he'd made himself go into his and Joan's home office, a few months after her death. (He'd have avoided their bedroom,

too, if it had been practical, as well as the bathroom and kitchen and living room; even the rubber mat by the door where she left her winter boots, and the key hook on which she balanced the little roll of dog-shit bags.) Those four rectangular spaces on the office wall, like ripped-out teeth: Noah's last Père Sonne prints. He knew at once that it must have been Victor, who'd slunk off during Joan's funeral while everyone else was eating and taken them off the wall, then smuggled them out of the apartment.

When Noah had called Fernande about it, she'd burst into tears, but it wasn't shock. Victor had sold hers long ago, she admitted. The only photos by their *pépère* that had stayed in the family were gone now; locked away from the world in some collector's vault. "What's the difference?" Victor had responded. "You guys would've donated them to some museum sooner or later." He was nineteen, so it would be adult prison this time. As a favor to her, Fernande begged, would Noah please, please not call the police?

He hadn't. But he hadn't forgiven his nephew either.

Noah had stopped asking Fernande for news at that point, though when Victor's name came up she always spoke with a determined positivity. He'd chosen to assume the best, or the least worst: that his nephew had finally calmed down in his twenties, as so many wild boys did, and become more or less law-abiding. (Amber and little Michael were still in the picture, though having a child to support could be as much hindrance as help, Noah imagined, to someone like Victor.) But maybe Fernande had hidden the worst from her brother, or maybe she hadn't known the half of it herself.

How could anyone bear to be a parent? Like contracting to love a werewolf.

His sister's retirement, which should have been a well-earned respite, must have been one long fretting and losing. First Dan—after a stroke, pointless rehab, another stroke—and then,

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three years later, Victor. Fernande had had to identify her son laid out on a refrigerated tray in the morgue in Queens: still exquisite in all his features, not yet twenty-seven. Farther east on Long Island, the day before, a motel chambermaid had found Victor on the carpet, veins full of heroin and fentanyl.

Which had never made sense to Noah, because he hadn't thought of his nephew as that kind of user. (A dope-smoker since twelve, but not what they used to call a *junkie*.) Drugs had their own irrational logic, he supposed, and these days everything seemed to be laced with something worse. If you weren't quite sure what you were taking, could you be held accountable for doing it, and for leaving your son fatherless?

If it came to that, Noah wondered now, which of our decisions were ever entirely our own?

Never to reach twenty-seven. He'd felt hurt that Fernande hadn't asked him to go with her to identify her son. What else was a brother for? But he supposed that on such a day, company was no consolation. And she must have known that he'd given up on Victor long before.

Joan, in his head: *Come on, surely you have things you should be doing?*

Noah stood on the pedal of the garbage can and threw away his cigarette butt.

Next morning, he writhed in his seat at the women's correctional facility. (The latest euphemism for *prison*.) Whenever he tried to straighten up, the molded plastic prodded him in the wrong part of his back. Rosa Figueroa was across the table, and the speechless notary public, Lucas Weinburg (brought along for what she called *witnessing*), on his left.

Noah was still rattled from the journey. An hour and a half up the Hudson, through snow flurries, in Rosa Figueroa's cluttered and underheated sedan, with Lucas Weinburg in the back,

apparently asleep. The social worker looked about fifty; worn but not burned out, with only a little gray in her black curls, and a birthmark on her cheekbone, which Noah liked her for. Also one of those discreet hearing aids. She turned out to have a case-load of twenty-four children. When Noah had asked how she remembered who was who, she'd laughed darkly and said the system was in such crisis that she and her colleagues were just doing triage.

After that, the two of them had made desultory conversation about bad news in the headlines till they'd reached a pretty hamlet ("full of Hollywood types," she'd told him). Then a sharp turn through a gate in a double barbed-wire fence, into the parking lot of the prison.

Behind Noah, a baby wailed on and on. Children, all ages; he hadn't expected quite so many of them. It hit him now that when a mother was sent to jail, her kids were receiving just as long a sentence. He thought of the boy, Michael.

"All right, Mr. Selvaggio?"

"Perfectly." He didn't mention his back. It wasn't advisable to admit to aches and pains after seventy, or younger people wrote you off.

"There can be delays."

Noah disliked statements of the blindingly obvious, but the woman was just being civil.

"Just as well it's a Sunday. They don't allow contact visitation during the week."

He cocked an eyebrow.

"Seeing her in person," she explained, "not just by video link. Ms. Davis is actually only entitled to visitors on Saturdays, since her name's in the first half of the alphabet, but the sergeant agreed to make an exception for a hardship visit because of the urgency."

Video link would have been fine by Noah. He'd have preferred to stay at arm's length from this whole mess.

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“Also we’re lucky New York State doesn’t insist on the full visitor-application process,” Rosa Figueroa told him. “You just need the permission of the inmate.”

Noah’s head was aching. Nothing about this felt lucky. He’d agreed to this appointment with the *inmate* out of a sort of guilt by association with Victor, her onetime . . . partner? Also as a posthumous favor to Fernande. She’d managed to meet her grandson on only a couple of occasions, but she’d spoken of him with a wistful fondness. If he was in desperate need of a roof over his head for a week or two, Noah supposed he could manage that much, after Nice.

Not that he believed any old guff about the dead looking down, like spy drones hovering. His baby sister was long past being herself. Like Joan, like all Noah’s dead—like he himself would be, at some point—Fernande was humus, dust. And a memory trace, he supposed, not to get too mumbo jumbo about it; a fingerprint of feeling left on her loved ones. So as a nod toward their shared past, Noah was here right now, on this hard, slippery chair.

The baby’s sobs rose again.

Beside Noah, Lucas Weinburg (clearly used to such places) was reading his way through the *Wall Street Journal*.

The guards—some men, some women, in navy blue—occasionally escorted an inmate to a chair opposite her visitors. Noah couldn’t work out the rationale for the order they arrived in; it seemed to him that his little group had been waiting the longest. In their dark green overalls, the prisoners looked like park rangers. The decor was bucolic, too. Amateurish murals on the walls: the wooded shore of a lake with a bald eagle overhead, and a deserted sandy beach with a single palm tree.

Noah’s sports coat hung too lightly, and his right hand kept moving to pat it. No wallets were allowed; Rosa Figueroa had made him leave his in her glove compartment, together with his phone, his cigarettes: all contraband. They seemed to Noah more

likely to get stolen from her car. He had been allowed to bring in his passport, as ID, for lack of a driver's license. At the metal detector he'd been sniffed up and down by a German shepherd, then patted down by a male guard in an intrusive way, and asked twice if he had a pacemaker (presumably because he might have forgotten). He'd had to sign a statement agreeing that he'd been shown the rules of visiting—mostly prohibitions on spandex, slit skirts, bandanas, and flip-flops.

“So, Amber. What did she do, to wind up in here?” He'd heard it was a faux pas to ask that question in prison, but did the same go for the visiting room?

Rosa Figueroa's mouth twisted. “Well, the charge was criminal possession of a controlled substance in the second degree.”

Why was she putting it that way, with an emphasis on *charge*—surely she didn't believe Amber was innocent? “Which substance?”

“The police found crack cocaine, meth, and oxycodone in her car.”

Noah judged the young woman, of course he did; like hackles rising along his spine. “She's a dealer, you're telling me?” What used to be called a *pusher*, the kind of parasite who was to blame for stupid deaths like Victor's. Amber had chosen this life, inevitably gotten caught, dumped her child on her own mother in one of the last pockets of Brooklyn resistant to gentrification. *Dying* mother, as it had turned out.

Rosa Figueroa shook her head. “I don't think so. Ms. Davis had no priors, no involvement with law enforcement at all. She helped her mom find a Section 8 apartment in a town house, away from the projects. My sense is, she was doing her best for Michael, for all of them. I believe his dad—Victor—had done time?”

Shame heated Noah's face. “Only as a juvenile.”

“Excuse me?”

“He was a child.” Too loud. “Legally.”

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“Right. But given the history, I’d say ninety-nine to one the stash was your nephew’s.”

Noah bristled. “Then why wouldn’t they have arrested Victor?”

The social worker shrugged. “Maybe Amber took the fall. She’d have known he’d get a longer sentence, with his previous convictions.”

This struck Noah as unconvincing and lurid. “Surely if what you’re claiming were true, it would have come out in court, at her trial?”

She inhaled as if summoning all her reserves of politeness. “Oh, Mr. Selvaggio. Nobody gets a trial these days.”

Noah felt rebuked for his naïveté.

“Amber would have been looking at three to ten years. Possession in the second degree is a Class A-II felony—up there with crimes like predatory sexual assault against a child.”

That startled him.

“Her public defender—well, they’re run so ragged, sometimes it’s months before they have a chance to meet their clients. It was probably on his or her advice that Amber accepted a plea of five.”

He swallowed. Five years.

Over near the left wall, an inmate put her head down on her crossed arms and a little boy stroked her braids.

What was keeping Amber? Not that her time was her own, Noah reminded himself. He supposed prison was like the military, that way: hurry up and wait. “And how long has she been here?”

“Almost eighteen months.”

It struck him that she couldn’t have supplied the heroin and fentanyl that had done in his nephew, if she’d been locked up months before he died.

Rosa Figueroa went on: “As a nonviolent first-time offender, very compliant, Amber actually has minimum-security status. But

New York's closed down almost all its minimum-security facilities for women, so she's held in this medium-security one." Her eyes slid from table to table. Women chattering, or sullen, or rocking toddlers in their laps. She murmured, "You'd be surprised how many of them are banged up because of their men, one way or another."

Noah could tell she was trying to visit the sins of the nephew on the uncle. "If you've no actual proof the drugs belonged to Victor," he barked, "it seems tasteless to keep speculating that this is all his fault."

Rosa Figueroa's lips parted as if she was about to say something else. Then closed. "I beg your pardon, sir."

An inmate gave an officer with a camera a plastic token, then pressed up against her tattooed man in front of a daubed approximation of a yacht. Belatedly Noah realized the murals were backdrops, where the prisoners could pose with their visitors; aspirational scenes of freedom.

A guard moved to separate the two. "Brother-sister pose!"

Reluctantly the couple pulled their bodies apart and stood facing forward, his arm slung over her shoulders.

No indication that it would be Amber's visitors' turn anytime soon. That baby began shrieking again. Noah tried to tune out the sound, as New Yorkers learned to do for car alarms, honks, and sirens. "If Amber's all that compliant," trying out the jargon, "wouldn't she soon be eligible for parole?"

"Sorry, could you repeat that?"

He kept forgetting about the social worker's bad ear. "Parole."

Rosa Figueroa shook her head. "There's no parole on determinate sentences for felonies."

"Oh."

"And the maximum good-time credit is one-seventh, so the earliest she could hope for, in terms of conditional release, that would be two years and nine months from now."

EMMA DONOGHUE

The wails of the baby went up a notch. Noah wanted a cigarette so much his fingers were curling.

Too bad, Joan said. She'd always despised the habit. It particularly galled her (or at least the neurological replay of her who'd taken up residence in Noah's head) that he'd smoked his first cigarette on the day of her funeral. Perverse, to have resisted the social pressure to light up—so strong in the '50s and '60s, beginning to taper off only in the '70s—for most of his life, then succumbed in 2009, of all years. He hadn't meant to spite Joan; he'd just needed something else to do with his hands when they reached for her and closed on nothing.

"Davis," a guard called, and gestured to their table. "Inmate Davis!"

A girl in green walked over and lowered herself into a seat beside Rosa Figueroa. Young woman, Noah thought, correcting himself. Shirt tucked into her pants, work boots. White painted nails, hair pulled back in a smooth blond ponytail, eyes sunken behind thick glasses. A hard case, he could tell that much at a glance. But unnervingly young.

Rosa Figueroa introduced herself as Michael's caseworker. "I'm very sorry for your loss, Amber—may I call you that?"

A nod, stone-faced. "They wouldn't let me go to Mom's funeral."

"Really?"

"Said the documents hadn't come through in time."

"That's a real shame."

"Where's Michael?" Amber scanned the room.

"I'm afraid I couldn't arrange in time for him to join us today."

The young woman's glance flicked over the two men sitting opposite her.

Rosa Figueroa introduced Lucas Weinburg and Noah. "Can I get you something, Amber, a drink?"

"Coke. Cheetos."

Noah couldn't help despising her a little for wanting junk food at a time like this.

"Mr. Weinburg," Rosa Figueroa asked, "could you possibly..."

The notary public stirred. She handed him a fistful of coins and he headed off to the vending machines.

"Well." She made an attempt at a smile. "Your son's been staying in the apartment next door to your mother's, at a Bernice Johnson's."

A rapid nod. "Berni's a good woman. Mom knows her from church."

"But she's got four of her own living with her, so..."

Hands clenched, the white nails digging into the palms. "Are you going to apprehend Michael?"

A weirdly formal verb, Noah thought.

"I hope we won't have to consider removal," Rosa Figueroa told her.

Another strange word, *removal*, he thought: like transporting a corpse.

"Our agency focuses on family preservation. It's all about kin, these days. If he could be placed with a relative..."

"Has Grace been in touch with you yet?"

Rosa Figueroa checked her notes. "This would be your sister, Grace Davis?"

"Yeah. Grace Drew, that's her married name—she still goes by that since they split up. She's got two little girls, they know Michael. Grace will definitely"—Amber broke off—"I'm ninety-nine percent positive she'll take Michael for me, now there's no one else."

"I've had some difficulty tracking her down. The number I was given, it seems it's no longer in service."

Ah. Of course he wouldn't have been anyone's first call, Noah realized. How long was the list of names the social worker had tried before reaching his?

EMMA DONOGHUE

“She moved, but I think I remember her cell,” Amber told her. “And you could try Instagram.”

“Sure, write it all down for me, any details at all would be a help.” Rosa Figueroa slid a notebook and ballpoint across the table.

The guard frowned.

Could pens be sharpened into shanks, had Noah read that somewhere?

“I’ll keep working on finding your sister,” Rosa Figueroa said as Amber started writing. “But in the meantime, can you think of anyone else?”

Noah felt quite invisible. A certain relief came with it. This young woman didn’t know him, and neither did her son; how could he possibly be considered *kin*?

The pen halted as Amber looked into the middle distance. “We have some cousins on Dad’s side.”

“Mm, they were in your mother’s address book, but the last whereabouts I could find for them were way out of state—Utah and Nevada. It would be less disruptive to find Michael a temporary placement right here in the city.” Rosa Figueroa turned her body toward Noah. “This is where Victor’s uncle could come in. Mr. Selvaggio’s a widower, no children of his own, and he’s offering your son a very comfortable home.”

Hold on, she was twisting his words. Noah’s voice came out hoarse: “Open to the possibility, I said.”

Both women stared at him.

“Just in the short term, as a bridge.”

Say “*One week*,” Joan proposed.

“For a couple of weeks, maybe. Until this sister of yours turns up,” he said in Amber’s direction.

Rosa Figueroa was nodding. “That’s so helpful.”

“Hold on.” Amber’s lip curled. “I don’t know this guy from Adam.”

“Well, likewise.” Noah hadn’t been expecting tears of gratitude, but what about basic manners?

“If you don’t mind my asking, how old are you?”

He was finding this whole conversation embarrassing.

Rosa Figueroa jumped in. “Seventy-nine, but he’s in excellent health.”

The age his father had died, it struck Noah now.

“He’s a retired university professor, owns his own apartment in Manhattan, with an empty bedroom.” She’d drawn all that out of Noah on the drive.

“A stranger,” Amber said.

Noah spoke up: “Technically correct.” What, this was a job interview now? Had he asked for any of this? He never should have answered the phone. “I’d be doing you a favor for the sake of—”

“I’m not looking for any fucking favors, mister.”

As her voice swooped up, the guard glanced their way.

“What do you want with some boy you’ve never laid eyes on? You could be a chomo for all I know.”

Noah’s ears were ringing as he rose to his feet. Was *chomo* some variant of *homo*?

“Amber, I know you’ve been through a lot.” Rosa Figueroa had her hand over the other woman’s. “Mr. Selvaggio . . .”

Noah couldn’t tell whether she meant to defend him or appeal to his kinder instincts, but he sat back down anyway, mostly because other visitors were staring.

Amber wrenched off her glasses and stuffed them in the pocket of her overalls.

The notary came back and deposited the soda and cheese puffs on the table.

“Of course I checked state and federal crime records, as well as the sex-offender registry,” Rosa Figueroa was murmuring. “He’s never been arrested—never had a parking ticket, even.”

EMMA DONOGHUE

Not that Noah had anything to hide, but it was a little unnerving to be investigated. “I don’t drive.”

Amber pulled back her head, turtlelike, as if that oddity counted against Noah; proved him incompetent rather than a lifelong New Yorker. She sat there slugging her Coke, a convicted felon, judging him.

“The key thing to remember is, he’s fourth degree of consanguinity to Michael, which would be enough for my agency to consider it informal kinship care.”

Amber was drumming on the table now, a flamenco riff of anxiety.

“See, this would be voluntary—you’d be choosing to leave your son temporarily with his father’s uncle—and I’d be involved just in an advisory capacity.”

“All right, all right.”

Noah thought Amber meant she agreed, but no, it turned out she was just working up another head of steam.

“What I don’t get is why you’re *advising* me to trust my eleven-year-old to this creepy old guy.”

Rosa Figueroa spoke very low. “Because a family member is the only alternative I can see to taking custody of Michael today and placing him in a group home.”

Those perfect brown eyes stared.

Noah tried to steel his heart. A small, homey residence with qualified foster parents—it couldn’t be anything like Victor’s Limited Secure Placement behind rolls of barbed wire, could it?

Let’s not kid ourselves, Joan said.

Noah squeezed his eyes shut. They’d failed Victor; not just Fernande and Dan, but Noah and Joan. Something had gone awry as that dazzling boy had entered his teens, and none of them had figured it out in time to save him.

“In which case, Amber, your parental rights . . .”

The young woman erupted. “I haven’t done anything to lose them!”

“I know.” Rosa Figueroa was gravel-voiced. “I’m so sorry. But any time your son spends in the system would go on your record. My superiors could make a decision that it’s in Michael’s best interest to terminate your rights before you’re released.”

Amber’s eyes glittered.

It was only then that Noah grasped why the social worker was behaving in such a rushed, unorthodox way. She wasn’t naïve enough to assume that Noah would do a great job of this. She was just trying to keep one kid from being sucked into the pipeline. Because of the holy word *kinship*, her harried superiors, glancing at the paperwork, weren’t likely to object.

None of this seemed fair. Dealer or not, this young woman had already lost years of freedom, her boyfriend, her mother, and now she was about to lose her only child. To prevent that, Rosa Figueroa was scraping the barrel, and Noah was all she’d managed to scrape up.

“Hopefully it would be just for a little while,” Rosa Figueroa told Amber in the kind of voice you might use to calm a horse. “If Michael stays in the city, remember, he’ll be close enough to visit.”

Still not a word from Amber, but her eyes brimmed.

“Why don’t we see how it goes, give them a chance to get to know each other, just on a trial basis? Meanwhile I’ll track down your sister.”

A tiny nod.

“All right then.” Rosa Figueroa flashed a grin at Noah. “Let’s start on the paperwork.”

A poke from Joan. *If ever you’re to extricate yourself, now’s the moment.*

But it felt as if Noah had passed that turnoff in the road some time back. “All right. In principle.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Amber asked.

EMMA DONOGHUE

“I’m certainly willing to, open to having the boy stay for a few weeks, if when we meet we, ah, we get along all right.”

Amber crossed her arms, creamy nails like a shield. “Oh, you expect to get along right off the bat? So, like, if Michael’s not feeling chatty you’ll take a pass?”

What was she hiding about her son? Or was Noah being paranoid? Maybe it was just that Amber had reason to fear this arrangement would fall apart as others had. He pointed out, “Michael may have something to say about the matter.”

She pursed her lips.

“Of course the boy’s views will be taken into account. But if we’re going to try this,” Rosa Figueroa warned, “you both need to sign off on it today.”

Silence from Amber.

Noah managed a nod.

Rosa Figueroa popped open her briefcase. “Here we go. ‘Designation of Person in Parental Relationship.’”

What an odd phrase, Noah thought. “Of course nothing can actually happen, in terms of his moving in, till after I get back from France next Monday.”

Amber’s eyebrows soared as if he’d said he was jetting to the moon.

“I’m leaving this Tuesday,” he reminded Rosa Figueroa. “The day after tomorrow.”

Her face wore its exhausted look again. “I didn’t realize it was coming up quite so soon.”

Noah was almost positive he’d told her. Maybe she’d missed that detail because of her hearing problem. Or was she counting on a seventy-nine-year-old not being entirely sure of what he’d said?

“The thing is, Bernice Johnson’s been more than patient, but she can’t keep Michael past tonight,” she went on. “Couldn’t your vacation...”

“It’s not a vacation. It’s a very long-awaited, overdue visit to the place I grew up.” *A bequest from my sister*, Noah wanted to add, but that sounded pampered.

“Can’t it be postponed?”

“No, it can’t! I’m going for Carnival—that’s like the Christmas of Nice. The flights, the hotel . . .” In peak winter season, the prices were already exorbitant. “I don’t know what it would cost to start changing everything.”

Amber’s mouth tightened.

On Noah’s university pension, it struck him, he was probably more comfortably off than anyone else in this awful room. Still, he didn’t mean to be manipulated into demolishing his plans. “This trip has taken a lot of organizing, and I’m not going to put it off.”

“Then you could maybe take Michael along?” Rosa Figueroa suggested.

He blanched at the prospect.

“That’s crazy,” Amber said.

“Listen”—Noah got to his feet, looking at neither woman but the space between them—“I’m willing to look after Michael from next Monday, for a few weeks. Take it or leave it.”

“Anyway, you can’t drag my boy off to Europe, he’s in *school*.”

Amber’s disdain provoked Noah. “Well, if it came to that, what could be more educationally stimulating than a visit to a famous city that’s two-and-a-half thousand years old?”

“I could speak to Michael’s principal.” Rosa Figueroa’s face was alight. “It would be the trip of a lifetime.”

“But—” *I want to go on my own*, Noah wailed in the privacy of his head. *Not shackled to some random boy*.

It was a half-remembered glimpse of Victor that stopped him from walking away. Dressed as a zombie for Halloween: plastic chains clattering behind him, an ax through his beautiful head.

Noah let himself down heavily onto the seat.

EMMA DONOGHUE

“Passport?” Lucas Weinburg broke his silence.

Rosa Figueroa looked sucker-punched. She turned back to the young woman. “I don’t suppose Michael has a passport?”

A blank look. “No, and he doesn’t need one.”

Relief, then, like a shot of glucose in Noah’s veins. He wouldn’t have to do this after all.

Rosa Figueroa seized one of Amber’s hands. “He’s going into a group home in East Flatbush, or he’s going to France. You choose.”

Tears plummeted off Amber’s jaw onto the scored surface of the table.

Noah couldn’t stand this. He whipped the clean cloth handkerchief out of his pocket and put it to her knuckles.

Amber pressed his handkerchief over her eyes, hard, like Justice’s blindfold.

Rosa Figueroa breathed out. “What time are you leaving on Tuesday, Mr. Selvaggio?”

What if Noah said, “First thing”—would that get him off, even at this eleventh hour? “Late,” he found himself admitting. “A night flight.”

“If we pay the rush fee . . . fingers crossed we’ll get it by Tuesday afternoon.”

A murmur from Lucas Weinburg: “Wouldn’t count my chickens.”

“No, we can make this happen.” Rosa Figueroa squinted as if consulting her mental files. “There’s a form that lets us apply for a passport on Michael’s behalf, and another for you to consent to a relative taking him overseas,” she told Amber. She scowled down at her watch. “I’ll run out to my car and find them online. The problem is, how to get hard copies, because visiting hours end at, what . . .”

“Two thirty.” Amber sniffled.

Noah wondered if the young woman wanted this mad scheme

to fall through, without its being her fault. Would she rather the devil she knew (at least by reputation)—the *apprehending*, the *removal*? She looked down at his handkerchief, the cotton wet and translucent in places.

“I have a portable printer I can hook up to my phone in the car,” Lucas Weinburg mentioned.

“Bless you!” Rosa Figueroa thrust her keys into his hand.

Noah sat useless while the notary sloped off and Rosa Figueroa started filling in the Designation of Person in Parental Relationship form with Amber.

Ballpoint in midair, the young woman studied it. “It doesn’t say anything about kin.”

Rosa Figueroa checked the wording. “That’s true, you can designate any adult. But it’s as a kinship carer that I’m proposing Mr. Selvaggio.”

Proposing? Strong-arming a prisoner into consigning her eleven-year-old to a geriatric stranger on the brink of leaving the States; Noah couldn’t decide whether Rosa Figueroa was a powerhouse or a loose cannon.

The social worker asked, “Have you anyone else in mind who’s willing, able, and can get here in the next ten minutes?”

Amber shook her head. Took a shaky breath. And signed.

Noah’s turn. He skimmed the form. (He remembered Joan making him go through a publishing contract clause by clause, even though it was only with a university press and would make him a lifetime total of some four hundred dollars in royalties.) “NOAH SELVAGGIO, a person over the age of eighteen... the care of the following child/children/incapacitated person(s) MICHAEL JEROME YOUNG D.O.B. 06/17/2006... Any authority granted to the person in parental relationship pursuant to this form shall be valid (check appropriate box and initial) . . .”

He looked up. “Thirty days? A couple of weeks, I said.”

“That’s just in case,” Rosa Figueroa said, placating.

EMMA DONOGHUE

The “person in parental relationship” was authorized by the parent to get the child immunized, consent to mental health treatment, permit absences from school . . . Noah finally found the line for him to sign.

After all the hurry, they had time on their hands, waiting for Lucas Weinburg to get back through security. Noah watched the clock.

Rosa Figueroa wrote down Michael’s school details, doctor, and dentist for Noah. Also Noah’s address and number for Amber’s reference, and Amber’s inmate number and the correctional facility’s details, “so you can stay in touch.”

Noah tried to think of pertinent questions to ask. But what came out of his mouth was, “You and Victor . . .”

Amber’s eyes flared. “Vic.”

Was that her name for him? *Tell me how it all happened*, was what Noah wanted to say.

But really, he could imagine. He’d seen puberty lure away the little nephew who’d once wet his pants laughing at a Monty Python video with Noah, and metamorphose him into a handsome devil: height, sideburns, a reek of plausibility, a libidinal swagger. Amber might have had no idea Victor had been only fifteen when they’d met; of course he’d have bullshitted about his age as well as everything else. The couple would have been careless, many times or once, and one time was often all it took for the young.

Joan and Noah had never had to have the conversation; never had a pregnancy scare. They’d always been careful, because it had mattered so much not to have their lives interrupted—their work lives, yes, and their life together. Noah didn’t care if that sounded ruthless, or pathetic.

“This Valentine’s would have been our twelve years.” Amber folded up his handkerchief.

Noah found her tone unreadable: loving, raging, lamenting? Fernande hadn’t known how to get in touch with the young woman

when Victor died; not realizing that Amber was in prison, she'd had to assume they'd broken up. But Amber spoke as if she and Victor were lovers, even now. "It must have been a shock," he said.

Don't pussyfoot, Joan advised.

He spelled it out: "The overdose."

"That shit was never his poison." Amber almost growled it.

Confused, Noah tried to meet Rosa Figueroa's eyes. But she was jumping up, because here came the notary, a sheaf of forms in his hand.

Manhattan was noisy with cold wind.

Back in his apartment, Noah called Vivienne. Twice in one weekend, after months of silence; the woman would think he was wooing her, or getting dementia. He wound up his summary: "So I seem to have sabotaged my big trip."

"No, no, this will do you good, you old fart-in-the-mud."

"You still sound like an immigrant. It's an *old fart* or a *stick-in-the-mud*."

"You sit down in the mud and fart in it," Vivienne insisted.

"What have I done to bring this on myself?"

"Well, now it's happened, it'll pull you out of the mud," she told him.

Try new things, if you wanted to reduce the cognitive deficits of aging, the *New York Times* was always advising: do crossword puzzles and brush your teeth with your nondominant hand. Of course there were losses; Noah wasn't senile enough not to have noticed. He knew he got distracted when reading, these days. (Mind you, wasn't everyone like that, since the internet?) He had to look up facts he'd known all his life, and resort to paper and pen for arithmetic. Joan had sworn by a simple maxim: keep working like a dog. But then, she'd only had to make it to seventy-four, herself; her mind (twice as sharp as Noah's to start with) crystalline to the end.

EMMA DONOGHUE

“When men retire they need projects, or they tend to keel over the first year.”

That was what had happened to Frank, so Noah couldn’t argue. “Michael’s not a project. He’s a bereaved child who deserves a home.”

“Yes, yes, but you’ll do for a couple of weeks,” Vivienne said. “Besides, such a tale! This child your sister tried to reach out to, all those years ago, this boychik who was lost...”

Noah thought of the Prodigal Son. “Hardly *lost*. He’s been with the Davises all along. He just didn’t know us Youngs and Selvaggios.”

“Well, high time he did.”

Us, what *us* was there now? Eleven years ago, there’d still been just enough of them to constitute some kind of clan. Of course Noah and Joan would have been willing to meet Victor’s girlfriend and son if he’d ever proposed a get-together. (If he’d ever reached out to his aunt and uncle for any purpose other than ripping them off.) But now Noah was the only one left of his own generation or the next; too late for any *family preservation*.

“Don’t underestimate the blood tie,” Vivienne added. “Like calls to like.”

Noah loathed this kind of mysticism. “Strands of DNA do not sniff each other out.”

But she was already going on about a woman in Philadelphia whose daughter had been abducted at birth. The grieving mother had run into a girl at a party six years on and somehow *known*, and made an excuse to steal a sample of her hair...

Joan had been even more of a cold-blooded scientist than Noah; how had she put up with this ditz? “I have to go now. You wouldn’t believe the paperwork involved.”

“All right, well, mazel tov.”

He let out a scornful grunt.

“Bon voyage, anyway.”

Noah sat down with his tablet and bought the kid's flights first, because you couldn't even apply for a passport without proof of immediate travel, paid in full. The app kept glitching. He missed travel agents. (Joan had left everything up to theirs, preferring to save her brain for what it was best at.) No seats left on his New York to Nice flight, so Noah had to change to a later one—ugh, more tiring—and add *Master Michael Young*. (Why did airlines insist on addressing male children as if this were the eighteenth century?) The whole eleventh-hour farrago was costing more than two thousand dollars, on top of what he'd already spent on a trip that he now considered a write-off. A trip an eleven-year-old who'd never left the States before might very well hate.

Complete purchase?

Noah clicked on the green button.

Monday at 8:55 a.m., on a freezing corner down in SoHo. When Noah spotted the social worker running up, he dropped his butt on the sidewalk—almost letting his latte fall too—and ground it out.

Rosa Figueroa nodded at him as she talked on the phone. "Mm, but only because his grandma was dying . . . Yes, I can assure you, it'll be very enriching." After another minute she clicked off. "I've gotten the truancy probation officer off your back for now, but when you're back from France, Michael can't miss another day of sixth grade."

Splendid, Noah was already in trouble.

"Oh, and the principal wants him to keep a diary."

A log of any mistreatment? Times that Noah might send him to bed hungry, or wallop him, or lock him out of the hotel room?

"For literacy, cultural studies." Rosa Figueroa covered a yawn.

Oh, a travel diary.

"How heavy a smoker are you, Mr. Selvaggio?"

EMMA DONOGHUE

“Very light.” A faint hope: might that disqualify him as a foster parent?

“You know not to expose Michael to secondhand smoke, keep all cigarettes and lighters locked away?”

“Sure, fine.”

“What about alcohol?”

Noah managed not to roll his eyes. “I was born in France. We’re known for our moderate and civilized use of wine.”

“Anything else at all by way of recreational—”

He cut her off with a shake of the head. It was pure hypocrisy, interrogating him at this point, as if she hadn’t already put all her eggs in his frayed basket.

The two of them had to pass through a metal detector, into the passport office, and—NO WEAPONS, FOOD, OR DRINKS—the guard gestured for Noah to drop his latte and half-eaten muffin in the garbage.

He and Rosa Figueroa took the elevator to the tenth floor, collected a ticket (D452) from a machine, and sat on more plastic chairs to wait for one of the so-called passport specialists. Rosa Figueroa’s name would always conjure up pressure on the buttocks for Noah. That was how it was, approaching eighty: everything got close to the bone.

“Proof of travel?” she asked him, like a fretful mother.

Noah handed over the printout. (*A hard copy*, they called it now, as if it were steel rather than flimsy paper.)

“Expedited fee for will-call service?”

Noah patted the pocket that held his wallet.

As the minutes ticked by, he tried to relativize this line. The worst days of Soviet Russia, breadlines of a thousand people. Or that Beijing traffic jam, a few years ago, that had lasted twelve days.

“Should be here by now.” Rosa Figueroa checked her phone again.

“Who?”

She looked at him oddly. “Michael has to be present for the application.”

Evidence that the child was real, Noah supposed, rather than part of some passport-selling scheme. He found himself sick with nerves. A bald, skull-faced senior citizen, that’s what he looked like.

No child’s idea of a good time, Joan joked.

Noah stared down at the names Rosa Figueroa had filled in. “Statement of Exigent/Special Family Circumstances for Issuance of a U.S. Passport to a Minor Under Age 16.” A whole category of words survived only on governmental forms meant to intimidate citizens, words even a professor could get through his life without saying aloud: *exigent*, *issuance*. He struggled to make sense of the fine print. The circumstances counted as *exigent* if Michael’s health or welfare would be jeopardized by not getting a passport immediately. (*Quick, I must see the Mediterranean or I’ll fall into a decline!*) This request might qualify as a “special family circumstance IF the minor’s situation makes it exceptionally difficult or impossible for one or both of the minor’s custodial parents/legal guardians to apply in person or provide the notarized, written consent.” A situation such as Amber being locked up and Victor being dead?

Noah watched numbers change on the screen over the booths. D445. C926. A188. Quite random, perhaps—meant to break applicants of any expectation that it would be their turn soon. “So what does Amber do all day?” He wondered if they had a writer-in-residence in her *correctional facility*. You heard of lifers getting PhDs, sometimes.

“Various programs.” Rosa Figueroa flicked through her papers. “Parenting,” she read, “Life Skills slash Budgeting, Alternatives to Aggression, Introduction to Building Maintenance.”

Oh dear.

EMMA DONOGHUE

“Also she’s working in a Signs and Metal Shop for twenty an hour.”

He blinked. “That has to be more than twice minimum wage.”

“Twenty *cents*.”

“Sorry—of course.” Hot-faced. The only word that came to mind was *slavery*. “She can’t even get her GED in there?”

Rosa Figueroa’s head tilted. “Amber graduated high school when she was eighteen.”

Ah. He shouldn’t have assumed she was a dropout. “I just thought, with the drugs . . .”

“She has no record of any substance-abuse problem. Never failed a urine test, even.”

“My mistake.” But could you really work in that world without being sucked in?

“She studied business at a community college for almost a year,” Rosa Figueroa added, leafing through the file, “before she moved back in with her mom for the birth. While Michael was little, she worked at a local discount store.”

Nineteen when motherhood hit her like a truck: so she couldn’t be more than thirty now. Victor must have been gone so much, walled up in his various *placements*. Had he been any use to Amber at all?

D448, said the screen.

Then, immediately, D449.

Noah checked the little scalloped ticket; they were D452. If the boy didn’t turn up in time, they’d miss their appointment, the whole improvised plan would fall through, and what then?

“By the way,” Rosa Figueroa murmured, “I got a friend in the NYPD to take a quick look at Victor’s record. He was arrested that same night as Amber.”

Noah stared. A little more than three months before he’d died.

“Also, he’d previously served a year in a men’s prison for dealing. This was in 2014 to ’15.”

His mouth was dry. “We...I never heard that.” It occurred to Noah that Fernande—ashamed of her son—must have decided to keep that adult sentence to herself. Late 2014, that was when Dan’s strokes had begun. Was prison, rather than callousness, why Victor hadn’t been at his father’s scattering? Fernande hadn’t said. Then again, Noah hadn’t asked. Or had she not even known? Instead of calling his worn-out parents and asking for another expensive lawyer, had Victor gone it alone? “Only a year. How come Amber got five?”

“More weight.”

Noah thought she meant morally. Then he realized it was a technical term: grams of drugs.

“For August 2016—the night he and Amber were picked up in her car—the record’s pretty minimal. They seem to have let Victor go the next day, and no charges were filed, whereas they threw the book at Amber.”

“Well, then. The police must have known the stash was hers.” But this rang hollow even as Noah said it. Since when were American police so reliably discerning?

She gave a tiny shrug. “Legally, there are always a number of factors at play, arrangements...”

It was Victor who was selling those drugs. Joan, like a hammer tapping in his head.

We don’t know—

Come off it! In all kinds of trouble since he was thirteen, a convicted dealer...

Oh Christ, Amber’s doing his time for him. Five years.

Facedown on a carpet, three months after they’d let him go. What was it Amber had said about the overdose? “That shit was never his poison.” Pushers made a point of abstaining from their product. So why had Victor succumbed and pressed the plunger, in the end? Maybe it had been too much for him, life without his girlfriend. Life outside, the freedom that should have been hers.

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Idiot. Stupid, useless wastrel. You weren't meant to speak ill of the dead, but sometimes...

"Anyway," Rosa Figueroa said. "Between the two of them, Amber and her mother seem to have done a great job with Michael. Even stayed on top of the paperwork. Birth cert, Medicaid card, immunizations, school reports..."

"A smart cookie, is he?"

She didn't respond.

Noah felt awkward. "I mean, I remember his father as distinctly clever." He'd taught Victor to play chess, around eleven or so, and soon the boy had mopped the floor with him.

Rosa Figueroa closed the folder and smoothed it with her hand. "Michael's a good kid, he's on track. But he hasn't been performing up to his capacities in a classroom setting."

"You mean he's flunking?"

She shook her head. "There's a Behavioral Plan in here that indicates he can be oppositional, makes bids for negative attention..."

Oppositional Defiant Disorder, that was one of the many labels the specialists had tried hanging on Victor, before he started refusing to talk to them. When Noah had looked it up, the so-called symptoms had seemed to boil down to being adolescent. How did it help to medicalize rebellion? "Any concrete examples?"

"Well, Michael was recently suspended for three days for being found in possession of a knife."

Pocketknives had been normal in Noah's childhood, but bringing one to school nowadays, he supposed that showed poor judgment. A psychologist had once told him at a cocktail party that if you didn't teach impulse control in the first four years...

"But I know that school, and it can be an intimidating environment." Rosa Figueroa gave a little grimace. "Though the new principal seems to be trying to turn things around. Anyway, the knife incident is not typical. You just need to know it's likely

Michael's going to act out and test your boundaries, especially while you two are getting acquainted."

D450, said the screen.

A woman hurried in and stared around.

Rosa Figueroa leaped up. "Ms. Johnson?" And then, as the woman hurried up to her, "Did you get the passport photos?"

"Ain't had time. I applied at the Burial Claims Unit like you said, but they only going to pay me back nine hundred, and the cremation come to fourteen hundred ninety-five." Bernice Johnson was stern with stress.

Not till then, while Rosa Figueroa was assuring her she'd speak to the burial claims people, did Noah notice the boy trailing in the woman's wake. Her hand grasping not his, but the sleeve of his puffy coat.

The small face pale, blank; no obvious resemblance to Victor. A ball cap with a flat brim pushed off to one side and an angular Y with an N over it, in exotic lettering; Noah couldn't remember if that meant Mets or Yankees.

"Well, let's get to it." Rosa Figueroa hurried them all over to Photograph Service. "Oh, Michael, sorry," she threw over her shoulder, flustered, "this is your father's uncle who's going to be taking care of you for a little while, Mr. Noah Selvaggio."

The boy let out a small, explosive sound.

A sob? No, Noah decided, a snigger. "Hello there," was all he could think to say.

No response from Michael.

"I'm going to be late for work. You be good now," Bernice Johnson told the boy. "Keep your head straight. Don't be no stranger." She mashed a kiss on his ear before she left.

At the photo booth, Rosa Figueroa was already filling in yet another form in a rapid scribble.

Waiting beside the child, Noah decided to risk it. "Is it the surname? Is that what made you laugh?"

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Eyes on his phone, Michael appeared not to hear him. Noah noticed it had cracks radiating from a hole.

“When I first came to America, I used to get teased a lot for that.” *You sell vag or something?* “This was back in 1942.” How unreal that sounded now, an ominous date from the history books.

“You’re how old?” Michael still wasn’t looking at Noah. His voice was a child’s, but getting husky, unless that was put on for machismo.

“I’ll turn eighty in a week.”

“You don’t sound like an immigrant.”

“Well, I arrived at the age of four, and kids are adaptable.” Noah winced. This kid had just lost his grandmother, on top of everything else; how fast was he supposed to adapt to that? “But I am French.” Though as a US citizen Noah always felt rather a fraud, saying that. *I’m from France*, was that any better? “So are you, partially.”

“No I’m not,” Michael snapped.

“‘No sunglasses,’” Rosa Figueroa read from the instructions, “‘no earphones, no headgear’—so cap off, please, Michael.”

The boy took it off and sat on the stool. His brown hair (nearer to Amber’s shade than Victor’s) was buzzed short in a way that reminded Noah of convicts in old movies.

“Better not smile,” he said in the boy’s direction as he was paying the photographer.

“Why not?”

“It’s whatchacallit, biometrics. The distance between the edges of your mouth and your eyes, that kind of thing, the proportions get distorted by a smile. You’ll look less like yourself—I mean your usual self.”

“What if I usually smile?”

In Noah’s two-minute experience of this child, he didn’t.

Michael was glued to his phone again.

“Eyes up, please,” the seen-it-all photographer called.

“Do a neutral face,” Noah suggested.

“What do you mean, neutral?” the boy asked.

“Not smiling, not frowning, just as if you’re calm.”

“Like dead?” Now he played possum, jaw hanging, eyes staring, torso lolling off the stool.

Rosa Figueroa spoke up. “Michael, can we please get this done before we miss our turn at the passport desk?”

“‘An unaffected smile is permitted,’” he called out, pointing to a sign on the wall. He stumbled over *unaffected*, but there was nothing wrong with his reading.

Noah hid his irritation. “I guess they must have changed the rule. But *unaffected*, that means nothing goofy or over the top.”

Michael pulled a sinister grin with his fingers hooked in the corners of his mouth.

Noah might end up losing two thousand dollars to the airline because this kid wouldn’t stop monkeying around.

“Sit up straight, please.” The photographer suppressed a yawn.

“Phone away,” Rosa Figueroa told Michael.

He only tightened his grip on it.

“That’s OK, it’s just a head shot,” the photographer said.

Once released from the stool, Michael put his cap back on and pulled it all the way down.

They had the envelope of warm prints in about a minute. (The electronic sign over the glass booths still said D450, so they hadn’t missed their slot.) In the pictures Michael looked older, Noah thought; harder. But really, eleven—that was barely formed.

He sat down on the plastic seat beside the boy. He noticed a tiny hole in Michael’s coat, a bit of fluff sticking out.

Go on, Joan said, make more sparkling conversation.

“I’m sorry about your grandma.”

Rosa Figueroa caught that. “Sounds like she was a wonderful

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lady, she'll be missed. I bet she's looking down, watching you right now."

The boy's small face showed nothing at all.

The sign jumped from D450 to C927, then straight to D452, and Rosa Figueroa leaped up as if she'd been electrocuted: "That's us."

Out in the bone-rattling wind, afterward, Noah tingled in anticipation of the large coffee he was going to enjoy, by himself this time, in a not-too-trendy café, before he went home to gather his forces. "How should we get Michael back to school?" he asked Rosa Figueroa in the most responsible voice he could put on.

She frowned at her watch. "Hardly worth it. I have to be in Downtown Brooklyn for a hearing by twelve thirty, and before that I need to make a couple of calls... but maybe we could fit in the home visit now?"

She wasn't really asking, Noah gathered, and the home in question was his apartment. "Ah. OK. I haven't had a chance to tidy up, but..." That was the whole idea, he realized; it wouldn't be an accurate spotcheck otherwise.

Michael was playing with some ball-shaped electronic game, oblivious to the cold.

Rosa Figueroa fretted over her laminated bus map.

"Let's treat ourselves to a cab." Noah said it lightly, like a line from a Noël Coward play. Would she guess that he was so worn out he thought he might drop down in the street?

She made only a token protest.

To fill the silence in the taxi, Noah said, "I used to work in Brooklyn, as it happens. I taught for more than forty years at a university." Though the engineering and applied-sciences campus had been five miles from Ella Davis's notorious neighborhood.

He won't be interested in your career, Joan pointed out.

Snagged in traffic. Noah watched the ticker mount. Would

the boy think Noah was a billionaire? It was all relative, he supposed. Rich enough to take a yellow cab, but not a limo with a peaked-cap driver; what did you call that?

“What’s up with that hat?” Michael didn’t look up from his beeping globe.

Rosa Figueroa wasn’t wearing one, so the boy must mean Noah’s. His hand flew up to adjust the sit of his old fedora. “What’s up with it?”

“Why are you wearing it?”

“Why do you wear yours?”

Michael shrugged.

Noah tried again. “What’s that game you’re playing?”

Several seconds passed.

“Can you answer the question, Michael?” the social worker murmured. “Mr. Selvaggio just wants the two of you to get to know each other.”

Enough of a further pause to be insolent before Michael said, “*MindReader.*”

“Is that right?” Noah asked. “It reads your mind?”

A scornful sound in the boy’s throat.

“So . . . you think of something? And then?”

“It does a question about the thing, you say yes or no—”

“Oh, that’s an ancient game,” he said with relief. “A TV show, and it was on the radio before that. People have been playing Twenty Questions for centuries.”

“Nobody’s even had electricity for centuries,” the boy muttered.

Rosa Figueroa roused herself. “So, you know where your uncle’s going to take you tomorrow, Michael? France! If your passport comes through.” Faltering.

“He’s not my uncle. Cody’s my uncle.”

Hang on, who was Cody? “Is he your aunt’s husband?” Noah asked.

“Mom’s brother. He lives with us.”

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Noah looked at Rosa Figueroa.

“Cody Davis has been staying at their mother’s on and off this past year,” she admitted.

“Then why can’t—” Noah stopped himself. “Didn’t you say on the phone that I was Michael’s only relative in New York?”

“After we ruled out Mr. Davis. He’s on disability—in chronic pain. You’re the only one in a position to be able to offer care.”

And how could Rosa Figueroa possibly have known whether Noah would have it in him to *offer care*? “What’s wrong with him?”

“He uses a wheelchair, I believe from an injury he suffered, years ago. That right, Michael?”

The boy nodded over his electronic ball.

“You must be missing him, too, as well as your grandma.”

“Is this Cody still at the apartment?” Perhaps with some kind of hired support . . . If Noah could throw money at this situation, he’d do it in a minute.

“Landlord kicked us out already.” Michael’s voice was bitter.

“I think your uncle’s with friends in Queens for now,” Rosa Figueroa told him, “but I’m sure you’ll see him soon.”

So this Cody was motherless and homeless too. It was all such a disaster.

“And Mr. Selvaggio is your great-uncle, which is another kind of uncle.”

“What’s so great about him?” Michael wanted to know.

Whether that was ignorance or wit, it did make Noah smile.