

PRAISE FOR *US CONDUCTORS*

“*Us Conductors* stretches its arms to encompass nearly everything—it is an immigrant tale, an epic, a spy intrigue, a prison confession, an inventor’s manual, a creation myth, and an obituary—but the electric current humming through its heart is an achingly resonant love story. Sean Michaels orchestrates his first novel like a virtuoso.”

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“Michaels’s voice will pass through you like live current and conduct you to parts unknown.”

—CARL WILSON, music critic for Slate.com and author of
Let’s Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste

THE WAGERS

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The Wagers

SEAN MICHAELS



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*for T,
my companion*

There's limited fortune in the world, it seems,
or a distribution problem.

—KAREN SOLIE

When I get to heaven, they will not ask me, 'Zusya, why were
you not Moses?'

They will ask me, 'Zusya, why were you not Zusya?'

—RABBI ZUSYA OF HANIPOL

CHAPTER ONE

Nobody remembered Theo Potiris's first joke. Theo himself didn't remember. He'd scribbled his setlist on the back of an electricity bill, folded it in fourths, lost it. What he could imagine was a room, a stage, a microphone. Loud spotlights, crummy comics, tired portraits on the Knock Knock Club's wall. He recalled the way the darkness crowded around the tables, made it seem safe to laugh. Another first-timer had brought his mother and Theo couldn't take his eyes off them: the mope in shorts and T-shirt; the mom in black blazer, skirt, her long hands wringing an undrunk daiquiri. The son had yet to go up but the mother already sensed the way this would go. The boy's smile was like a scrap of egg. He was not funny, couldn't be, any more than a cocker spaniel can paint a still life with his paw.

Theo sat alone. He hadn't brought backup, not because he feared being embarrassed (though he did fear this, comprehensively) but because he feared the opposite even more: his friends' approval, or

rather the semblance of their approval—those kind white lies. When Theo went on stage he wanted to be able to trust whatever happened—to get up and tell a joke and to know without doubt, for a few faint seconds, whether that joke was any good. Whether he was.

When the MC called his name, Theo drained his glass. This he did remember: hearing his name; the Malbec in his mouth. He threw down a balled napkin and rose to his feet, shuffled through the spectators and up two steps to the stage. He was twenty-four years old. He wanted more than anything to be a comedian and at last he would test the premise, unassisted. He wrapped two hands around the microphone stand. He hesitated, released his hands, feigned a minor cough. He looked the darkness in the eye. He said, “Hey, I’m Theo, I’ve never been up here before.”

Then he told a joke. His heart was a trembling die.

They laughed.

He told another.

They didn’t laugh, he told another. And another and another. And every one was a way of asking, *SHOULD I?*

SHOULD I?

SHOULD I?

⋮

On a Friday twelve years later, Theo still didn’t know if he should. He was swooping downhill towards a hippodrome with a hurricane at his back, the wind whipping at the flagpoles, making the divots ding, ding, ding. Red glyphs swept across the racetrack’s LED marquee. Starlings whirled above him as he locked his bike to a shiny contrivance. Something about the weather had called these birds into

town—unfamiliar flocks, carried against migration routes. He stood staring for a little while, listening to their whistles, ear tips pinking. It was cold. The starlings looked like a strange quick smoke, the profits of a spell.

“*Bienvenue*, welcome!” A skinny teenager had been paid to stand just inside the hippodrome’s doors, shrieking hospitality.

“Thanks,” said Theo, and flashed him a thumbs-up. Did people still give thumbs-ups? As he passed from the outside to the concourse he registered the change of light and so the hour—late afternoon. He didn’t like to leave his Friday bet so late. He had a routine: If he won he’d go to the Knock Knock that night, tell some jokes. If he lost, he wouldn’t. He liked to know the outcome early so he’d have more time to visualize his set—or to put it out of his mind. This was a tradition he had learned from his late father. Theo Sr. had considered gambling a form of existential assessment. One bet a week, for exactly ten dollars: an augury, a fortune cookie, an appraisal of where he stood with the world. “A mirror of myself,” Senior had called it, pulling on galoshes one night.

“But you don’t even try to *win*,” Theo’s older brother, Peter, complained. “You just bet.”

Senior regarded his two sons. “A woman does not look at her reflection in order to make herself beautiful,” he said. “She looks to see who she is.”

Theo hustled past a line of digital slot machines and the drooping men who leaned against their razzmatazz. The slots players creeped him out—were the men playing the machines or the machines the men?—but the malaise left him as soon as he reached the observation deck, a concourse ablaze with chandeliers, with carpeting the colour of American dollar bills. Ecstatic voices yelled from mounted speakers.

Plate-glass windows stared down onto the track. A few dozen men and women hunched on plastic chairs, watching the race on high-def TVs, where it looked brighter, realer, than it did through the glass.

Theo put down his bike helmet and grabbed a racing form from the pile on the counter. He scanned it quickly, waiting for something to catch his eye. Two races in the next forty minutes. Nancy Pants, Ghost Pine, Intensive Purposes, Nic the Smokestack . . . He had won a bet on Ghost Pine a few weeks ago. Some familiar jockeys too: Franco Segal, P.E.D. Felice, Jamal Jones—you don't forget a name like Jamal Jones. Nothing stood out in the odds but then again that was the point. Not to score a coup or to outsmart the handicap: just to pick a horse and see.

His eyes landed on a filly called Expiry Date, with 5:3 odds. Jockey: J Jones. He presented himself to a clerk and slid across ten dollars straight from his family's grocery store till. "Ten on Expiry Date," he said. "To win."

"Good luck," the clerk replied. She was about his mother's age and wore the same shade of wine-coloured lipstick. Theo didn't think that his mother had ever been to a racetrack. He never understood whether she had accepted or merely endured her husband's visits to the Dodecahedron Grill, where he met a bookie missing both front teeth. But Theo had taken strength from seeing his father approach the abyss and stare into it, then walk away. To accept uncertainty, to give the universe some power over you . . . When his father won, returning triumphant from the restaurant's tzatziki-scented lounge, his good mood sustained him through the next week. Such an easy trick, a young Theo observed. Such an easy shortcut to feeling fortunate.

"Not for children, not for children," his pop used to tell him. "Gambling's not a game. It is a duel with the possible."

“I *want* to duel with the possible,” Theo insisted.

“No, sesame seed,” replied his father. “It is not for children. Childhood is the only time when there are no stakes—the only time in your whole life, Theo! You will have many, many years of stakes. Perilous, high stakes. Do not hurry them.”

I should bring Mom, Theo thought. One of these Fridays. Ask her if she wants to come; to watch a wager for old times’ sake. He worried that she spent too much time at the store, especially since his father’s death ten years ago. While other women her age enjoyed retirement, playing cards around a table at the café called Social Club, Minerva Potiris went on tallying receipts by the cheese counter, sampling every cask of honey. “I’ll quit when nobody wants groceries any more,” she told her kids, touching the little Casio watch on her left wrist.

Theo took his betting stub and walked away from the clerk. He glanced towards the TV: another race, two horses neck and neck. A bettor in a sports jersey took to his feet. “*Vas-y!*” he shouted, *Go!*, and Theo felt a flutter of discomfort at the desperation in the man’s voice. The announcer on the PA was narrating every fluctuation in the contest between Mistake Not and Filly Cheesesteak, and Theo studied the man’s face—clear eyes, chapped lips—wondering, *Mistake or Cheesesteak? Mistake or Cheesesteak?* until finally Filly Cheesesteak streaked over the finish line, a cheesesteak’s span ahead of Mistake Not, and the guy in the jersey carolled in triumph. The losers around him swore in unison. How much money had just changed hands? How many fortunes made or squandered?

Theo sank into a seat in the corner and stared out the big window. The sky was blue and silver. Small clouds careered across the horizon. Horses sauntered to their paddocks. The starlings Theo had observed

before were curlicuing over the racetrack. Their messages in the air seemed zigzaggier now, more up-and-down.

Theo's phone buzzed in his pocket. A text from his sister:

where r you??

He tapped a reply:

Track. Back soon.

Ok need u here.

What is it?

He waited, staring at the screen. Mireille didn't reply. At that moment a voice started squawking over the PA—a new voice, different from the standard race announcer—explaining in two languages that the next race had been delayed.

emergency, Mireille texted.

What kind of emergency? he wrote back.

This was part of Mireille and Theo's dynamic: he always had to ask. Mireille was the older sister and she enjoyed her status. There were six years between them, and seven more between Mireille and Peter, the eldest. Whole epochs existed in those gaps, eras that had defined the terms of their engagement. Peter the distant paragon, fully formed. Mireille—fearless, passionate, wielder of secret

knowledge. She was the one who could fold a puffer fish from paper, who extinguished candles with her fingertips. She had shown him 1-800-GOLF-TIP, where a strange man counted numerals down the line, and, one Christmastime, the ancient game of dreidel—a game of stakes, yes, over chocolate coins in gilded foil. Mireille was the only one of them to attend Sunday Hebrew school, and the only one to undergo bar or bat mitzvah, singing with her eyes shut at the tiny synagogue on Bagg Street.

Theo's own induction into adulthood centred on Super Nintendo, cake, a baker's dozen of birthday candles. But his father also arranged a different kind of ritual. At last, after an eternity of Theo's pleading, he had told his youngest yes: on the threshold of his teens, Theo could make a bet.

Theo was stoked. He saved a month's allowance and added all his birthday bounty, plus whatever change remained inside his piggy bank. Almost sixty dollars altogether, which he clutched in a plastic shopping bag as they set off for the Dodecahedron Grill. It was the day after the party, afterimages of Mario Kart still blinking behind his eyes. Theos Jr. and Sr. ate their way through two souvlaki platters and a pair of hot fudge sundaes before the gap-toothed bookie slithered up to their table. Theo avoided eye contact as the two men discussed handicaps and spreads. His father didn't really follow sports, as far as Theo knew, and had no allegiances. Sometimes he bet on a local team, but often not. "The only no-go is Boston," he had told his son. "Boston is all maniacs. I will not endorse a maniac."

Now Senior unfolded five two-dollar bills and passed them one at a time to Nikolaos. "Flyers over Flames," he said. Four eyes turned to Theo.

Theo swallowed. He scrounged the notes and coins from the bottom of his plastic bag and dumped them in front of Nikolaos. "Fifty-eight dollars and fifty-five cents," he said, trying to sound both formal and nonchalant, in the manner of grown-ups.

"For?" the bookie said.

Theo had been reading the sports section all week. "The Expos over the Astros," he said.

"Expos."

"Yes."

"You sure?"

"Yes."

"I'll give you 3:2," Nikolaos said.

Theo Sr. clicked his tongue.

"Okay, 2:1," Nikolaos said. He shifted in his coat. "We have a deal?"

Theo looked at his pop, who affected an air of studied neutrality.

"Yes," Theo said.

Senior nodded, sealing the deal. Then Nikolaos took out his notebook and a fine-nibbed pen and he carefully added two lines, one for Senior's hockey bet and one for Junior's baseball. "Enjoy your desert," he said, and extruded himself from the pleather booth.

"Expos over Astros, eh?" said Theo Sr., when Nikolaos had gone.

"Yes."

"Sixty dollars. A big bet."

Theo swallowed. His stomach sank and he suddenly felt doomed, doomed, doomed.

"Okay, sesame seed," said Senior. He patted his son's hand. "How do you feel?"

"I feel okay," he lied.

“That’s good. ‘Okay’ is good. You don’t want to feel too happy, or too lousy. You want to feel balanced.”

Theo took a deep breath. “I feel balanced,” he lied.

“Me too, boy-kid.” Theo Senior took a similar deep breath. “Like a spinning top.”

Of course Theo lost that bet. He watched on the family TV set, stricken, as the Astros hit homer after homer, laying waste to their opponents, turning his \$58.55 into empty air.

The Flyers lost too. Lingering in his son’s bedroom doorway, the elder Potiris offered a glum sigh. “Sometimes, Theo, life is half-terrible.”

Later, his mother appeared with a dish of honey cake. As she smoothed Theo’s hair with her hand, her eyes seemed like the oldest things in the world. “You can’t always pick the right team,” she told him, “or you’d be cheating.”

∴

Theo got back into line. The clerk with his mother’s lipstick was on the telephone, taking down a bet. Her blue ballpoint scratched across the paper—*zero, zero, zero, zero, dollar-sign*. This was a very large bet. Theo inspected the upside-down racing form, trying to decipher the name that the caller was staking their fortune on. But then the clerk was putting down the phone and sliding aside the paper and asking, cheerfully, “Can I help you?” His phone chose the same instant to buzz and shudder off the counter, clattering to the tile. He stooped to pick it up.

nut emergency, Mireille had written.

He stared at the screen.

A cashew crisis?

Not an emergency?

“*Sir?*” the woman said.

“Sorry, nut emergency,” he mumbled. He rubbed his face. “The announcement said my race would be delayed. Do you know for how long?”

“Which race?”

He fumbled at his betting stub, dropped his helmet, stooped again, stood. “Fifteen?”

A technical delay, she told him. At least ninety minutes. He squinted at the giant green clock, with its spinning Labatt 50 bottle. It felt like cheating to make another set. For twelve years he had been repeating the same ritual, letting one wager decide whether he’d get up on stage on a Friday night. It was like casting lots. One damn horse, not two, every seven days. Ten dollars, no loopholes—a judgment from the fates.

And so: twenty-five minutes later, back in his neighbourhood, Theo’s future remained unsettled. He skirted taxis, glided through stop signs, bypassed insensible pedestrians. He was paused at a traffic light when a woman pulled up on a green road bike, a plastic milk crate bungeed to the back. The crate contained a kitten, which turned and smiled. *Meow*, it said. “Meow,” Theo murmured, waving a finger. He was reminded of how much he loved this city. Not the highways and box stores around the racetrack but the untidy beauty of its oldest parts, the stalwart trees and stubborn shopfronts, the cast-iron stairways, bundled denizens, even the pitted roads. Lasters, all of them, enduring every dumb winter. He squeezed his brake grips. The kitten was still staring at him. He and this woman and her pussycat would

bicycle up the hill, past the gazebo and the Cartier monument, the park gone brown from too much rain, straining up the slope, cresting the summit, then all downhill. *Lasters*, he *thought* again.

The traffic light changed, and they did go up, over, down the hill, through an empty intersection. The kitten and its owner turned left at the next corner. “Goodbye, cat!” Theo said to himself, imagining a Garfield thought-bubble ballooning into the air. He felt oddly elated. He had bet on a horse on a Friday evening and that horse had neither won nor lost, not yet. He was suspended in limbo, his fortune untold. Schrödinger’s black cat, borne northward on a bike.

He skipped the curb into an alley. The asphalt was sprayed with loose leaves, young ivy, vivid in its greens. How many times had Theo biked along this alleyway, dodging the same sequence of mudpiles, potholes, rain grates . . . At the speed-bump he slowed and dismounted. The back of Provisions K didn’t look like anything much. Sixty-one feet of cement and red brick, two storeys and a peaked roof, a small loading dock and a ramp to the basement. A blessedly tidy dumpster, a Jenga stack of pallets, a little pat of snow unmelted in the shade. A lettuce leaf in the gutter.

Just inside, Mireille and Eric were having an argument beside the utility room: his sister with corkscrew black curls, her face streaked with feeling; Eric, her partner, his domed head bowed. Theo swallowed.

“No buts!” Mireille yelled. “You can’t add a ‘but’ *now*. You can’t just add one later. I heard you the first time, when there wasn’t a but.”

“*But*—” Eric said, “listen, I *do* understand where you’re coming from, I just disagree, and that’s *okay*, but—hold on, hold on, *BUT* I think you didn’t actually understand what I was saying! I was *saying*—”

“Hi guys.” Theo said.

Mireille's head snapped towards him. "There's a nut emergency," she said, voice low, as if she were warning that a war had broken out.

"Yes," said Theo. "What does that *mean*?"

"Everywhere," Mireille said. "There are nuts everywhere."

"Okay," Theo said.

"Everywhere," Mireille repeated.

"Got it."

"You were at the track?" Eric asked, trying to lift the mood. "How'd you do?"

"I don't know yet."

"That must be tormenting for you," said Mireille.

Theo sighed. He pushed through the employee's area double-wide door and into the store. He felt a little tremor behind him, the needle of their argument lowered back onto the platter.

Everything seemed normal on the floor. The dinner rush was over and the aisles seemed weirdly desolate: a middle-aged man scrutinizing a bag of ketchup-flavoured potato chips, a little girl observing the unguarded olive cart. Across the sound system, in Greek, a troubadour sang a blues of loneliness and hashish.

Theo came from groceries. He was a child of Provisions K, the city's oldest grocery store, an emporium teeming with humans and their cheeses, families and their fruit, fish and wheat thins and paper towels. His parents had met there. Perhaps Theo had been conceived there. His first word was "milk" and, according to legend, Little Theo had said it while gesturing at a carton. There was an older breed of supermarket, built in the years before frozen pizzas and fair-trade coconut chips. Low ceilings, non-fluorescent bulbs. Piped-through radio and rembetika. Creaks and jangles, crashing tills, shuffling boots, plastic thuds, whorling spools of

produce bags, strangers' cotton kissing cotton as they brushed by in narrow aisles. Also: laughter by the pita bread, crying by the tuna steaks, local gossip, scooped granola, the clamorous maze of clumsy citizens and canned tomatoes, vats of Greek goats' cheese, chocolate chip cookies, fennel and plums, pork chops, aluminum foil, tamari almonds. 9 AM–11 PM, 7/52 an ambiance as familiar to Theo as the beep of reversing delivery trucks, the tang of expired yoghurt.

Back when Theo was a baby, Minnie Potiris had nursed her youngest son in every crowded section—among cereals, deli meats and root vegetables. She'd let him totter among the taco shells and day-old bread. His features then were his features still: a plump baby face, a contagious smile, dark brown eyes that shone like wet stones, giving his expressions volatility and grace. He had thick black hair. It lay wild across his brow or flew up at angles above his ears, as if his temples had been pinned with laurels. The old-timers still told him stories of those days—squeaking like a cheese curd, snapping along to Smokey Robinson. He became a kid on a high stool by the cash, swirling round and round, fingersnapping like a bandleader.

Now Theo prowled Provisions K's health-food section, past the rice-and-pickles aisle. He was almost at the bulk bins when he stepped on something hard. A hazelnut. No, many hazelnuts—there were hazelnuts everywhere, Theo observed. Beneath his shoes, hazelnuts like a spray of pebbles across a beach. And over by the spices: glossy red Brazil nuts, like chips of terracotta. Barbecue peanuts in russet drifts near the ice-cream vaults and beside the fajita kits a stretch of big, wobbling walnuts, placid in their shells.

“Nut emergency,” said a soft voice.

It was Hanna, Mireille and Eric's daughter, trimming lamb chops behind the meat counter. At twelve, she was the youngest member of the Potiris clan and arguably its most gifted butcher. She was brown-eyed, spindly, wide-shouldered, a girl with wingspan—although at times she still folded up so small. Theo would catch her curled up beside her grandmother in Minnie's apartment upstairs, sharing sections of the Saturday paper, or perched on a watermelon crate in a quiet corner of the store, listening to songs on her earbuds. Hanna was kind, but the poise with which she moved, her almost spooky self-possession, could at times seem severe. She set down her knife, bloody and shining, on a white butcher's sham, and said, "The cashews are fine."

"In that case 'emergency' is a stretch," Theo said.

Hanna smiled. "Peanut problems," she suggested, and slipped her earbuds on.

Theo pressed on towards the source. When he arrived at the bulk food bins, his two nephews were making progress with a broom and an industrial-scale dustpan. His mother stood over them with her arms raised, entreating or cajoling, inspiring her grandsons to greatness. "That's it, Maurice, broom it!" she said.

Tonight Minerva Potiris wore jeans and an oversize Dans la rue hoodie. She didn't show her age; she seemed resolute, eternal, like a black-and-white photograph of Olympia Dukakis: their princess of produce, their doyenne of delivery. Minnie's expression was one of happy exasperation—elevated eyebrows, parted lips, a smile abiding in her eyes. She had always been grandmotherly, even in her youth. Grandmotherly above all: her grey hair cut short like a boy's; refined lipstick and chipped nail polish; something protective in the way she hovered.

Nudging a mound of hazelnuts with his toe, Theo said, “Did a squirrel win the lottery?”

Minnie laughed. His nephews stared at him like a pair of startled golden retrievers. Peter’s sons were burly—man-sized but not yet manlike. Each was named for a hockey player: Maurice, prodigiously nosed, with a helmet of gelled hair, wielded the broom. Blake, green-eyed, with a shaggy blond mohawk, held the dustpan.

“Little Theo, always just in time,” Minnie said. “Right as we’re finishing up.”

“What happened?”

“Maurice and Blake were filling the nut bins,” she said. “They had an accident—a series of correlated accidents, actually.” The boys’ gazes swivelled into the floor.

“Mireille said it was an emergency.”

His mother gave him a sly look. “A little panic never hurt anyone. Where is your sister?”

“In back with Eric.”

A shred of sorrow rippled across her face. “Always cats and dogs with them.”

“They’re all right.”

She shook her head. “Money’s like locusts.”

“Locusts?”

“Too biblical? ‘Like fascism?’ ‘Like high-waisted jeans?’ It comes, it goes. They shouldn’t worry so much.”

“Worrying runs in the family.”

“I never worry,” she said. “I consider. I mull.”

He smiled. When he was younger he had taken his mother’s repartee at face value. He had thought of her as a naturally expressive person, bubbly and uncontainable—saluting long-time customers, laughing at

the fish-boys' jokes, scolding new hires who arrived late for work. But at night, after Senior died, she sat alone in her apartment above the store, playing solitaire or reading a historical novel, listening to *Ideas* on the radio. She was an introvert at heart, and also a subtle actress, calibrating her performances to the people she encountered in the world.

"I want to take you for a walk later," he said to her. "All these weird birds have blown in. Big gulls. Starlings."

"Vultures?" she quipped.

"Anything's possible. Maybe you'll see a toucan."

"Toucans are diurnal." Minnie let out a breath. "And I want to show you something too. Downstairs. Remind me, Little Theo," she patted his shoulder, "when we're all cleared up."

"Okay."

"Okay," she repeated. "Are you going on stage tonight?"

"Still waiting on my bet."

"A soldier of fortune," she said, with a smile. She turned to watch her grandsons at their sweeping. "Now look at those boys," she murmured. "Look at those conscientious darlings."

When Theo was satisfied that the nut crisis was under control, he continued on his rounds. He checked in on the cashiers, the delivery guys, the cleanliness of the counter behind the dairy section, where cheddar got chopped into blocks. He poked his head into the closet of vinegars, held his breath in the walk-in fridge they called the cheese pit. There were a thousand different routes Theo could wind through Provisions K—from strawberries to Swiss chocolate, challah to salsa, bitter greens to demerara sugar. Today they were all shadowed by his unresolved bet. There had been Fridays when he hadn't bet at all, but never before had he bet and bolted before the outcome. Now it felt

rash, reckless. And so he checked and rechecked his phone as he tidied chocolate bars, topped up the olives. Somehow, the race still had not happened. Or had the racetrack not updated its website? He imagined Expiry Date, suspended mid-gallop. Was there a way the race could have been run, some anomalous result, which meant that Theo had become a zillionaire? He tossed blackened bananas into a garbage bag. No, there was no way. There was no way he had won more than \$26.67. And he had probably lost.

Hadn't he?

Eventually his mother barged in on Eric and Mireille, still arguing in the back. "Today's special is: truce," he heard her say. She coaxed them back onto the floor and soon all six of them were working together to clean the swept-up nuts. Theo and Mireille steadied the basin of water as Eric and their nephews poured almonds and hazelnuts inside.

"I remember doing this with stones from the lake, to make them shine," Mireille said.

Theo smiled. "There's nothing more beautiful than rocks in a bath."

Minerva ran the show: *these* nuts could be soaked; *those* ones could not; the unshelled peanuts were all headed to the compost. They deferred to her authority because they were a company and she was the choreographer. Mireille teased her little brother but not too much; Theo gave his nephews avuncular encouragement. Grime floats, nuts don't, and before long Theo and Mireille were dabbing pistachios with unspooled paper towels. When the family finally dispersed it felt like the end of a concert. Maurice and Blake needed to catch their bus back home. Minerva headed to her desk to review the day's receipts while a tray of damp shells began to air dry.

Theo poked at his phone.

“What are you doing?”

He raised his head. Hanna’s brown hair was mussed, curls winging like a haphazard ski jump.

“Checking on my bet.”

“Don’t you find out right away?” His niece’s apron was covered in ruddy stains, dried blood from the butcher counter. On her it looked harmless.

“Usually,” he said. He cursed at the phone’s insensible touchscreen.

Customers pushed past with shopping carts crammed with cornflakes, lamb chops, smoked and sweet paprika. Hanna stood with hands clasped, waiting. The patrons barely noticed the bloodstained girl and her uncle sitting in the corner. Theo tapped and swiped and pressed and finally exhaled. “Aha,” he said.

“Aha?”

“That’s right,” he said, stretching out his legs.

Expiry Date had finished first, trailed by Mouldy Manor and Ojingo. It was as if a weight had been lifted from Theo’s chest, and thirty dollars deposited in his pocket.

Hanna stepped aside as her uncle, newly minted, began to rearrange jars, yank packets of lentils to the front of their shelves. The rembetika music on Provisions K’s PA seemed reassuring now. Theo thought about whether he should text Annette, the manager at the club, to tell her he’d like to get up tonight, or whether he should just show up. Before long, the store would close. The last delivery guys would drive away. The sweepers would sweep up whatever Blake and Maurice had missed. The cashiers would leave their time sheets and grab their coats. Theo would review his new material one last time, grab his helmet, set off. There is solace in a pattern, in the arc of probability landing where it ought.

Still, he had a little time. Maybe he'd find Minnie, take her on that walk. Maybe she'd show him whatever it was she wanted to show him. He passed the newest of the family's produce cabinets, a bank of white steel shelves with its own row of hi-tech Largo bulbs, a mounted panel spraying mist every 540 seconds. The cabinet's mound of herbs looked like a hillside—domestic parsley, imported parsley, dill and cilantro, mint, rosemary, kaffir lime leaves, thyme and sprigs of tarragon and basil, next to parcels of black and purple kale bound with string, pods of baby spinach, and a cardboard box of organic frisée. Theo remembered standing as a boy beside the herbs, eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling, imagining Greek valleys and Roman gardens, magic country.

Theo smiled a thirty-six-year-old smile. The mister misted at him. And then at the end of the row of produce, sitting in a wooden chair that had been there since another age, since the war, since long before the spritzing cabinet or the refrigerated produce section, since before Theo was born, he saw his mother. Her eyes were shut, her fingers interlaced atop the round of her belly, a perfect dreamer. "Hi, Mom," Theo murmured. She didn't stir. So much for going on that walk. He walked over to her and, very gently, touched her forearm with the tips of his fingers. "Ma?" he said. She didn't stir. He leaned in closer, to where she sat in the cold.