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"An achingly beautiful look at living in the shadow of genius, science, math, and loving the difficult to love. Chatagnier looks at the sky and people with equal wonder, and the result is deeply moving. *Singer Distance* is a book for readers of Sagan, lovers of paradoxes, anyone who has ever looked up. This truly gorgeous novel will live with me for a long time."

— **ERIKA SWYLER**, author of *Light from Other Stars*

"*Singer Distance* is a surprising, captivating, surpassingly intelligent novel, and I mean it as a great compliment when I say that I'm not quite sure where it came from. The narrator who leads us through its pages insists that he is one of the world's carpenters rather than one of its architects, but the reality that surrounds him is extraordinary, and so too, therefore, is his story. On the macroscale, it's a story about the interpersonal pathways that connect one planet to another and the interplanetary gaps that separate one heart from another; on the microscale, about what it feels like to occupy a single life, and how difficult it is to tell, when you're in the middle of it, whether that life is being wasted or fulfilled."

—**KEVIN BROCKMEIER**, author of *The Ghost Variations*

"*Singer Distance* pulled me in from the very first page. I fell in love with the characters—who are full of mettle, vitality, and human chaos—and the audacity of the book's alternate history, wherein contact has been made with a civilization on Mars, but that contact leaves humanity with more questions than answers about the nature of the universe. This book is a love song to our desire for understanding, the scientific drive for progress, and the thread of faith that runs through both. An outstanding debut novel."

—**ADRIENNE CELT**, author of *End of the World House*

"An inventive and heartfelt novel about the search to understand both the universe and ourselves. The best sort of mystery, one with big ideas at its center."

—**KATE HOPE DAY**, author of *In the Quick*

SINGER DISTANCE

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SINGER

DISTANCE

ETHAN

CHATAGNER



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For Ishmael and Colette
Keep looking up with me

“What a long way it is from one life to another, yet why write if not for that distance.”

—YIYUN LI, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*

“The mathematics of the Martians is a curious language, a thing that asks us to affirm contradictory truths. It asks us to see closeness in distance and distance in closeness. It tells us we must stop seeing the two as different. Perhaps, like a patient with his crutch, we are not ready to give up our way of understanding distances. We lust after what we might gain from such an understanding, but meanwhile fear what we might be asked to forsake. I for one feel ready to throw it all away, my old understanding of the world, in order to gain a new one. I would very much like to.”

—FLORENCE REDGRAVE, radio interview, 1936

PART I

LOVE BETWEEN EQUALS



As soon as I saw the light off the side of the highway, I felt myself falling in love with it. It was too far from the road to be a town and too high up to be a farmhouse. The light was the wrong hue anyway. We'd passed many roadside lights in this week of night driving, and without realizing it I had become fluent in the language of them. This one was a word I couldn't translate. No town huddled next to it. No road branched off toward it. Its unknowability, its unreachability, compelled me. I felt the urge to veer toward it.

Crystal slapped my shoulder and told me to wake up.

I gripped the wheel tighter and told her I wasn't sleeping.

"You were drifting," she said without judgment.

"Not much to hit out here."

"Lucky for you."

"The only thing you could hit out here is a pothole, and those are in the road."

"You're assuming the space is empty because you can't see what's in it. You should know your way around that old fallacy."

“I’m comfortable with the inference,” I said. “I saw what this state looks like in the daytime.”

Crystal said she could drive, since I was falling asleep. No, I said. Stopping would wake the others. I told her again that I hadn’t been sleeping, but felt less certain this time. I felt fresh now, set in a state of magic alertness, a headspace as clear as the sky after rain. I peered into the darkness north of the highway, looking for the light. I checked for it in my mirrors. It was gone. It might have been a dream, or it might have been in my blind spot. We were in an old newspaper van with tiny mirrors. The whole thing was a blind spot.

We were on Route 66 somewhere west of Oklahoma City, sometime past midnight in the waning days of 1960. Our self-appointed mission was unknown to anyone but the five of us in the van. Ronnie, Otis, and Priya were dozing in the back, but to me, in those hours, there was only Crystal. I looked at her there, barely lit in the cab of the van but still glowing. She’d started college at seventeen and grad school at twenty-one. Twenty-four now, she was the youngest of us by four years. She didn’t look it. Her eyes were young and her smile was young, but light creases were appearing on her face. Her hair hadn’t blanched but it had dulled, some of its color draining away even in the two years that I’d known her. She’d be gray by thirty. My mother was like that. She looked older than she was but wore her age well, as if the signs of it were fine accessories she’d graduated into. Smile lines were the best makeup, my mom said, and no amount of cosmetics would cover up a lifetime of frowns. Like fine wood or leather, she and Crystal were both improved by the slight sense of wornness.

I did know not to say that to a woman, even if I thought it was a beautiful compliment.

Johnny Preston was on the radio but hardly existed. Our friends sleeping in the back of the van hardly existed. I lived for these nights with no one but me and Crystal, the darkness of the expanse erasing everything but us. A road can be the connection between places or the distance between them, and as deeply as I longed to reach our destination, I also longed to drive this one forever. I'd volunteered to drive the night shifts. I was a natural night owl, I'd said. They all knew otherwise, but no one else wanted to volunteer. Those moments were perfect, just the two of us awake in the pocket universe of the van.

Otis snored, we'd discovered, but at highway speeds you could barely hear it. The lightest breezes sounded like waterfalls when they broadsided the van. He was turned toward the wall of the van, his oversized frame taking up more than a third of the mattress. His feet stuck out from the bottom of his blanket, resting against the cold metal of the van's back door. Ronnie slept in the middle, crowded closer to Otis than he would have liked in order to allow Priya, sleeping on the other side of him, a buffer of respectful space. No matter how we arranged it, you could smell other bodies while you slept. This was the close-quarters traveling that came with long-shot missions and desperate hopes.

I thought about what I could say to start Crystal talking. I often said things just to hear her respond to them. Not only to hear her voice, but also to see her way of thinking. It was a game I played with myself, to say something I thought interesting, something I thought I was interesting for knowing, so I

could see how far beyond me she was. We'd been together for a year and a half, but I still felt the same need to prove myself that I'd had when we started dating. I'd fallen in love with her in our first semester, listening to her translate our professor's complex ideas into simple analogies so the rest of us could get it. The brilliance radiated off her, but she was so unaware of it, or so used to it, that she inhabited it as casually as an old sweater. The great, unexplained miracle of my life was that she'd said yes to a date. I'd come to understand that I'd always feel like this around her, this blend of torture and rapture.

I mentioned the rumble strips that had recently started showing up on Boston's freeway on-ramps and off-ramps. In a few decades, I said, they'd be everywhere. They seemed like some utopian metro extravagance now, some city planner's splurge, but the economics were there: fork out for them once, and for every prevented accident, you didn't have to pay police to come monitor it, you didn't have to call in a tow truck and cleanup crew, you didn't have to pay for litigation.

"You're imagining a safer future for yourself," she said.

"And everyone in the van with me."

Did I know, she asked, about the musical road in Denmark? It used bumps, like road braille, to play a melody. You could do the same thing with those grooves. Change the size and spacing of the grooves to control the pitch, then arrange those pitches in a pattern to create the timing. They'd hardly look like anything more complex than a railroad track, but could contain a whole song. All you had to do was drive over it. Imagine every highway in America, she said, with its own song coded into the grooves of its shoulder.

“You’d be encouraging people to drive on the edge of the road,” I said.

“Well, you could build them in the lanes.”

“Awful hard on the tires.”

“Stop ruining the fun.”

But this was the fun. She liked to be pulled down to Earth a little. Then she hopped right back up into the clouds. She’d been more alive since we left Boston, more intense. The moments of quiet poetry that would slip out of her on late nights or cold walks, often with me as the only witness, were now bursting out of her all the time. The rare shooting star had become a meteor shower.

She went on about how incredible codes were. They looked the same, inscrutable, to most bystanders, but any short strip could be a song, a message, or a unique identifier. At that time, barcodes were only in development. I don’t know if she’d read about them or had conceptualized them wholesale in her own mind. The latter wouldn’t have surprised me. She could have been a millionaire at twenty-four if she’d turned her mind to practical things. Not that I wanted her to.

Otis’s snore took over the vanspace. A sawing exhale, an interminable pause, a gasping inhale. Our vehicle, a snub-nosed newspaper delivery van from the late forties, wasn’t as wide or tall as the vans in the coming decades would be. We’d all had to push to wedge a single full-size mattress into the back, which was a small cavern with a low ceiling. The whole thing rattled from the ten years it had spent delivering the *Boston Globe*, treading paved streets and cobbled ones. It was both remarkable and disturbing that Otis’s sleep sounds could compete.

“Code that,” I said.

Crystal leaned toward the windshield and looked up, as if she could see Mars from the car.

“I just love the humility of codes. The difference between looking at a sheet of music and hearing that music performed. Wouldn’t it be a tragedy”—she said, changing her train of thought—“if we finally figured out the Curious Language, only to be killed in a highway crash?”

“That’s an awfully generous *we*. And my driving is fine. There’s nothing to hit out here.”

“How long until someone else would solve it?”

“Centuries, maybe.”

“Don’t flatter me.”

“Decades, at least. It’s been decades since the Richter Site.”

Off to the left, some creature’s eyes, low to ground, reflected the headlights for a moment.

“Let’s hope we’re not in a Shakespeare play,” I said.

“Do you think all lives can be classified as either comedy or tragedy?”

“Everything goes to tragedy. That’s the direction of the universe.”

“That’s such a boy thing to say.”

“But there’s room for comedy on the way.”

“What’s your favorite?”

“*King Lear*. You?”

“*Midsummer Night’s Dream*.”

The night that couldn’t seem to get any darker seemed to get darker before it happened: the black sucked inward, it deepened, and then a flash cracked the horizon in half. The sky bleached on either side of the bolt, then lavender turned blue

again, and the black soaked it back up. The cab was silent, as if the flash had ionized all the sound in the car. No one woke, but Otis's snoring had let up at some point without me noticing. Crystal stopped speaking and stared straight ahead. I thought for a moment that she'd been stunned somehow, hypnotized, by the flash. That her mind had been knocked out of her body. Then I looked at her lips and saw she was counting Mississippi.

"Don't bother," I said. "It was too far away."

She put her hand on my leg.

"It proves me right, though."

"About what?"

"You can't see the clouds, but they're out there."

I wanted to tell her she was wrong. A bolt-from-the-blue could strike twenty-five miles from a cloud, from an ostensibly clear sky. I caught myself before I said it, before she could smirk and point out the heavy lifting my *ostensibly* was doing, before she could quote my words back at me: "twenty-five miles *from a cloud.*"

But I did want to hear her talk more, so I told her about the rumors that the government had tried using nuclear blasts to communicate with Mars in the early 1950s, out in the New Mexico desert we'd be crossing the coming day. They'd used low-kiloton explosions in a sequence adapted from Morse code, hoping the blasts would be so bright the attempt would be impossible to ignore.

She snorted.

"That's like writing a love letter with your dick," she said. "No wonder they didn't get a reply."

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“There are Martians?” Crystal had asked her father many years ago, after the Soviet attempt of 1948. He’d come home to change from the suit he wore to his day job to the coveralls he wore to his night job. As usual, she’d cooked a dinner for him to eat between the two, which he sat down to devour the moment he came in the door.

Picture Crystal at her worn-out kitchen table, age eleven, hearing about Mars for the first time. Picture what the world looked like to her in the cramped, one-bedroom apartment she and her father shared until he was able to secure a professorship and move them into a house. The only window was the one over the transom. The world looked like walls. It looked contained. Alone in the apartment, penciling in her homework, she had heard about the Martian civilization for the first time, a nasal voice trumpeting out of the radio: *The Soviets are trying to do what scientists have not attempted in a generation. Will they succeed, or will Mars stay cold as ever?* She didn’t know what to make of it. The Russians, carving some kind of strange message into the Siberian woods? Trying to signal another planet? American kids learned the history of our attempts to communicate with the Martians in third grade. It was rote to us, but to Crystal it must have been the first time the world looked open. When she was in second grade her family had been focused on outrunning the Germans, fleeing Poland for Belgium and then Belgium for the United States. She’d missed hearing about Mars in school, and it was one of many things lost to the chaos of rebuilding. No one had time for history, let

alone astronomy, in those years, and the Martians had been quiet for so long nobody talked about them.

At their table, her father chewed his mashed potatoes longer than mashed potatoes take to chew. Back home, he had been a professor of statistics, but in the United States, until he could find a professorship, he was a bank teller and a night custodian at the high school. He stuck his fork into a big cabbage leaf and turned it upright. His voice changed to his professor voice: cautious, Socratic, and laden, it always seemed, with traps. Crystal imitated it whenever she told this story.

“Some people think they’re all gone. Something went wrong. Their agriculture collapsed. Their atmosphere was poisoned. They stopped responding so completely. They went so quiet.”

He paused, raising his brow to let her know he was assessing her, seeing if she’d take the bait. She was a stoic kid, she said. She revealed nothing. I never knew if I bought that. She was the opposite of stoic now—sometimes dreamy to the point of unresponsiveness, but never walled off.

“Those people don’t want to accept that we didn’t measure up to the challenge.”

He explained that Giovanni Schiaparelli, the astronomer who first noticed the formations on Mars in the late 1800s, had taken them as waterways, seeing shadows he thought were lakes and seas. Percival Lowell later interpreted them as irrigation canals, drawing water from the poles to the central plain. Over time, other astronomers started to take in the built environment, however crudely they could sketch it after stepping away from their telescopes. All this stuff the rest of us learned

in third grade, Crystal heard first from her father sitting at the dinner table, untying his tie while he ate.

By the late nineteenth century, most scientists had accepted the possibility of Martian life and had come to think we needed a sign, something big enough to catch their attention and unique enough to demonstrate our intelligence. There was talk of a giant circle, the most perfect shape in nature, a shape evoking peace and harmony. But it was decided that a circle risked being mistaken for an impact crater. Instead, the Dutch astronomer Flavius Horn oversaw the carving of three parallel lines into the Tunisian desert in 1894. The giant tally marks, each a hundred miles from end to end, were filled with petroleum and set on fire at the moment of Mars's direct opposition. Months passed, Mars receded out of viewing distance without a response, and the project was taken for a failure.

"They didn't see it?" Crystal had stopped eating by this point, and was staring evenly at her father.

He put his fork down, held a finger up. His signal to be patient.

The next favorable opposition of Mars was two years later, in 1896. When the planet came around to us again, he told Crystal, the astronomers of the world took to their telescopes, each hoping to sketch out the new definitive map. What they saw made them break down in tears: cut into the red plain of Mars, in sharp, intentional relief, were four perfectly parallel lines.

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