ALLEGRA HYDE

DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA

> Where in the memory of man can one find anything comparable to what is taking place before our eyes in North America?
>
> —*Alexis de Tocqueville*

SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL, which made things difficult. The planes of her face cut to carry the light, liquid umber hair, pensive mouth, nimble body—she looked good even when shoplifting, sweatshirt-clad, her movements hunched. When I first saw her, stealing cashews from a convenience store in Massachusetts, my breath caught in my throat. I nearly missed my chance to follow her outside.

Honey was her name—or the name she gave me.

Her looks drew me to her, but they pained me as well. Soon she wouldn't be her. Anyone with eyes could have predicted this. Honey was beautiful and also broke. She was an ideal candidate for consignment.

Not that the future had ever stopped me from pursuing what I wanted in the present.

I had been in America less than a month—in Honey's weathered township mere days—but courtship isn't complicated. After a second casual crossing of paths, a clever remark, a half smile, I had her looking my way. And I knew how to hold a look. For my trip to America, I had packed light, but my two suits were impeccably tailored to my narrow chest, hips. A swagger lilted my walk. No one would call me beautiful, but they might use the word striking. Close-cropped hair, razor gaze; I possessed an androgynous cool that flipped hearts. And Americans went mad for accents.

Honey was no exception. After a round of drinks at the local tavern, then a twilit stroll, her hand found mine: fingers small and cold. I wanted to suck them warm, though I did not tell her that until later. And by then there were more complicated matters to discuss.

HONEY'S ANNOUNCEMENT arrived on a November afternoon. We had been seeing each other for several weeks by then; I had rented a room in town, and we had been meeting there mostly. We were resting in my narrow bed when she said: "So I talked to one of those recruiters who hang around the basketball courts—"

I pressed my eyes closed, braced for what I had known was coming.

"—and we actually had a great conversation," Honey went on, "about my future and my current financial situation. And, you know what? I think I'm going to consign."

From her tone, it was as if she had decided to dye her hair pink or get a tattoo.

"It just seems like the best choice for me. Especially right now, with how young I am and everything. It's a big opportunity. Plus, all my sisters have done it."

I kept my face impassive as she rationalized further: her oldest sister, Danika, had used her consignment payout to cover daycare for her toddler, which let her work full-time at the packing plant; Roxanne had used hers to buy a car, which allowed them both to get to the plant. And while she, Honey, didn't have a baby—and couldn't get hired due to her criminal record—maybe she would use the funds in other ways. She could start her own business. Or she could at least pay down her family's debt—her mother's MS wasn't getting any better, and the medical bills kept coming. Also their house needed a new roof.

I had once visited the family's house. A tired brick structure in a row of former mill homes, it leaned precariously over an eroded riverbed. Garish children's toys and dead lawn mowers lay scattered around an unkempt yard. The interior stank of chemically fake American cheese. The dereliction of the place had appalled me.

"What do you think, Alexis?"

I turned onto my back, my hands behind my head, pretending to ponder Honey's question. The rented room was above a local grocer and below us the register clanged with the afternoon rush, shrill with its clattering belly of coins, the swish of paper money, credit card beeps, as locals purchased pumpkin pie filling, mint ice cream, meat, for one of their culture's holidays. This was the kind of American town I had come to see, but it had not yet shown me what I wanted to know.

"My other idea," said Honey, "was that you and I could travel together. After consignment, I'll be able to pay my own way. More than anything, I've always wanted to see the world. I could even help you with your research."

She propped herself up on one elbow to gauge my reaction. The bedsheets fell away, exposing the smooth length of her torso. With a different woman, I might have guessed she had done this on purpose—to cow me—but from everything I had observed of Honey, she was guile-

less. Also: stubborn, striving, utterly provincial—a true citizen of her country—which did not change the fact that her body had a majesty of its own. Dark hair dripped around her shoulders. Her skin glowed. I ran a thumb along the ridgeline of her torso: down into the valley of her waist, then up the crest of her hip.

"Or do you only like me for my looks?" said Honey—emitting a loud, false laugh.

There was nothing to do except pretend her question offended me.

"Really, Honey?" I said. "You think I'm that shallow?"

She apologized immediately—relieved to be cast as the one in the wrong. I let her coax me back into her arms, our limbs entangling, the mood restored. Yet the ease of deception unsettled me. For all her rural coarseness, her petty criminality, Honey expected the world to be fundamentally fair and good; she expected me to be. And this expectation of hers moved me. It cut some ballast of detachment that had, until then, held me at a researcher's steady remove from the American experiment. I might have been worried—I should have been—but then, Honey's lips found my neck. Her fingers teased my thighs. And all worries faded against the landscape of her body, its infinite potential.

AMERICA HAD LOOMED in my imagination my whole life. Across the sea, yet ever present. An opposite and an endpoint. A fever dream and a nightmare—the force of its customs, values, ambitions, emanating outward. Consignment was a lever on America's slot machine of possibility. What if, it proposed, you could sell your youthful beauty? What if you could buy it back? Because in America, everything had a price. That liquidity pushed the nation down the river of equality—kept the country buoyant on its democratic raft—or so the story went.

I myself had grown up in one of Europe's obdurate second cities. You know the kind: with a decent cathedral, ruins a few tourists visit—though not with the vigor they might bring to a country's crowning metropolis. A city saved from tackiness by virtue of its elderly architecture and a stubborn commitment to constancy. A city with boulevards and outdoor café tables, small brutal espresso drinks; clothes shops selling cheap shirts, their prices in the windows. Dance music at night. Drunks. An old man on a bench, who has always been there. Schoolchildren in uniforms. Pigeons, papers fluttering. Cigarettes and crusty bread. Brisk winters. You know—I know, you know.

My family was well-off by many standards. They had afforded me the

finest schools, access to the right circles, though most of our wealth was tied up in several crumbling properties too expensive to repair—a metaphor for most of Europe, really. My homeland longed to sit unchanged: comfortable in the ease of decay, drunk on its own history. Yet here was America, tugging on the reins of the new century, dragging the whole world with it. I wanted to know where she was taking us.

Officially, I had traveled to America on a government-sponsored fellowship, tasked with studying the nation's system of detention centers for undocumented immigrants. Europe was beset by its own refugee crisis; state officials were happy to have me research American methods—specifically, how America turned a profit on an outwardly intractable problem. I had been sent with a research partner, Beaumont—a longtime friend—but quarrels divided us early on. We had gone our separate ways in Boston. I cared little at the time. Detention centers were not my main interest. I wanted to understand America in its entirety; I had the idea that I would write a book.

Then I met Honey.

ON THE SCHEDULED morning of Honey's consignment, she and I stood together in a strip mall parking lot, in a small city a half hour's driving distance from her hometown. Honey's father and a jumble of her sisters were there, too—a bleary smear of faces. We had arrived early. The sun was coming up, the parking lot nearly empty: endless asphalt except for a few enormous American cars. Spilled motor oil fumed around us and I inhaled willingly. There was a primal quality to what was happening, as if we were all standing before a volcano, a Delphic vent, a pit of lions, knowing something awesome—in the terrible, incredible sense—was about to happen.

Was it wrong that a part of me felt excited? Consignment was outlawed throughout most of Europe. One wasn't even supposed to talk about it: religious types got uncomfortable. Then, too, it was simply déclassé. Technically, consignment may have faced restrictions in a few U.S. states as well, though with the sitting president's deregulatory push, red tape had loosened across every sector.

Which is not to say that consignment was without stigma in America. For discretion, facilities were often embedded within other businesses. The site where Honey would receive the procedure was housed inside a travel agency—images of palm trees foresting the windows—the front innocuously positioned between a nail salon and a sporting goods store.

At ten minutes past the hour, the agent who would coordinate the financial aspect of the consignment had yet to arrive. Honey's father—a wan, poorly shaved man—scanned the parking lot. In his hands, he wrung a sweaty handkerchief. His face twisted, presumably as he calculated the family's potential loss of income.

I felt a dual pulse of disappointment and relief.

Honey seemed in a similar state: holding my hand tightly, her whole body vibrating. She had been impulsive, bawdy, the week prior. Appearing at my rented room at all hours, she demanded feverish sex, late-night visits to the local tavern; she binged on peppercorn cookies; she leaned out my second-floor window, catcalling men and laughing.

Her outbursts fascinated me—though they disturbed me as well. They were cries for help, no doubt: efforts to prompt me to admit that her beauty was what kept me close, that she ought not to go through with consignment. But while I was a flirt, a foreigner, I was no fool. To have made such a statement would have ended our liaison anyway, and I wanted to observe what would happen in the wake of the procedure. For all the discomfort that would come from seeing Honey transformed, the consignment process was uniquely American. My observations of Honey's experience could be included in my future book.

That our relationship would eventually end felt like a given—but that ending was far enough in the future so as to feel unburdensome. And when our ending did occur, I told myself, it would likely appear to be for reasons unlinked to her physical form. Honey and I might even part ways on good terms.

As we waited in the parking lot for the agent, however, my plan began to waver. Honey's manic stoicism had melted and her body pressed limply against mine. She thrust her hands into the pockets of my suit, as if looking for something. Reassurance? Commitment? My heart rattled, unmoored by apprehension. Meanwhile, her father and sisters stood to the side, muttering, shuffling—staring at us, then away. The family had never shown much affinity for me; we had barely said a dozen words to one another in the time I had known Honey. I do not know if this was because they were xenophobic, homophobic, or just rude.

Regardless, I tried not to look at them—especially the sisters, who were only a few years older than Honey, but who appeared many decades beyond that: their hair thin and white, skin mottled and creped, sagging.

I cannot claim expertise on the exact science behind consignment. From what I understand, the process was discovered by scientists work-

ing on a skin-grafting technology meant to serve chemically disfigured soldiers. Using AI surgeons, bioelectricity, a 3-D cartilage printer, and something called CRISPX, scientists transplanted the "multi-dermis" of cadavers onto soldiers of the same build. The precision of the resulting transfer was deemed "groundbreaking," "resurrectionary," and "blasphemous in the eyes of God."

The process was rapidly exploited by the private sector. Enterprising companies recognized that they could expand into one of the last frontiers of unmet consumer demand: youth at any age. All the Botox, plasma masks, and plastic surgery in the world could not truly replace what was lost to the passing of time—that is, until consignment. For the ultrawealthy who wanted it, a young, beautiful exterior could be purchased from a living youth, since "live consignment" turned out to be preferable to a procedure involving a cadaver. And for young people in financial straits—as many, like Honey, were—selling their external selves could grant them the start-up capital to transform their lives.

"She's here."

Honey's father pointed across the parking lot to where a blazer-clad woman was exiting a sedan, briefcase in hand. The agent had arrived.

To Honey, he said: "S'time."

Honey pulled her hands from my pockets but kept them in balled fists at her sides. The sun crested the strip mall roofline, illuminating the smooth planes of her face. My breath caught—as it had the first day we met—and I almost said to Honey: *No, no, don't throw it away, don't sell your beauty for anything, please, hold it tight, even as the months and years steal it anyway, and your youth slips from your grasp like water through fingers.*

And maybe I would have: the words right there, on the tip of my tongue, forged by a burgeoning tenderness. Because in the wash of that moment, it was Honey—beautiful, bighearted, sticky-fingered, naïve Honey—who felt most important. More important than any book I might write.

Yet how could I have explained myself? To advocate for her beauty was to admit the superficial dimension of my attraction. But to see her go through with the procedure—well, I discovered I might not be able to stand it. Though I had always planned on leaving Honey—our relationship a casualty of international travel—in that moment I realized just what, and who, I'd be giving up.

The anguish on my face prompted Honey to gather her own strength.

She stroked my cheek, then said, with the confidence of any American: "It'll be fine, babe. The procedure is perfectly safe."

I wanted to laugh and to cry. Unable to do either, I felt compelled to give her something. With no preprepared gifts on my person, I slid off my watch—a weighty gold number from my grandfather—and held it out to her. Honey snatched the watch at once and put it on her wrist. Then she beamed at me, at her family, at the agent beckoning from across the lot. Everything was going as planned. We would see one another on the other side.

THE DAY BECAME more dreamlike from there. Standing in the parking lot with her family, I wondered: Should I have run after Honey? Was there time still to tell her to stop? Around us, the sound of traffic grew louder. The father muttered that I could wait with them in the nearby sporting goods store, which had TVs—it would be many hours before Honey's procedure was complete—but I could tell his invitation was not genuine.

The sisters huddled together, whispering. A breeze plucked at their white hair, the hemlines of their thin strappy dresses. Soon, Honey would resemble them. She would retain her same voice, eyes, organs, bones, and most muscle tissue, but she would otherwise appear as her sisters did—all of whom had sold their youthful looks to wealthy senior citizens. It gave me vertigo to picture this, a sensation worsened by the parking lot's motor oil fumes. My eyes began to water.

"Coffee," I said, nodding vaguely into the distance. "Will return later—"

The family said nothing as I hurried off, though I could feel their eyes on my back. The sun was higher now, spiking my vision, the city roads choked with morning commuters. America unfurled in every direction: honking and hectic. Fast-food restaurants exhaled grease. Billboards shouted their wares. Even the homeless pushed shopping carts here. I turned down one sidewalk and then another, concentrating on putting distance between myself and the strip mall parking lot. It seemed the only way I might steady my thoughts—decide what to do next. The farther I went, however, the more parking lots revealed themselves, often serving businesses identical to the ones I had left. To think I had believed America prided itself on originality and individualism; the nation was breathtakingly homogenous.

Near evening, I caught a rideshare back to my rented room above

the grocer. My bed remained unmade, sheets frozen in the tumult of that morning. I felt awash in longing for Honey's embrace. It occurred to me that I might leave the bed untouched—in a kind of memorial—though as soon as this thought registered, the sentimentality appalled me. I needed to snap out of whatever trance I had fallen into. I needed to remember what I had come to America to do.

There was a text from Honey on my phone. I deleted the message without reading it. Then, before my mind changed, I blocked her number as well. A clean break was best for all involved, I decided; it might even be the more honorable tack. There was no reason to give Honey the hope that I would stay forever—after all, that had never been my plan. Also, despite the research benefits of observing Honey's procedure, consignment was but one aspect of American culture. There was so much about the country of which I still needed to learn.

MY RESEARCH PARTNER, Beaumont, I found in Memphis, Tennessee. A bus, a plane, and a cab had returned me to him, the travel costs exhausting my remaining fellowship funds. Luckily, Beaumont had not been as careless with his. He also seemed to have forgotten about our prior quarrel in Boston, which had nearly ended in fisticuffs. When we reunited outside a sooty barbecue restaurant, he wrapped me in a thick-armed hug, slapped me on the back.

"You smell like a wet hound," he said, and pretended to fan the air. "Per usual."

Despite the troubling events of the recent past, I grinned. Beaumont and I had known one another since primary school and had grown up as an odd yet formidable pair: him bringing a rotund affability to most situations, while I contributed shrewdness and impeccable taste. This remained true even through our university years. And though tension occasionally rose between us—such as when I became briefly involved with his sister—we always sorted everything out.

We were a good team, Beaumont and I; he was, I suppose, my oldest friend.

The pair of us got right to work. We had three months remaining to research and write our fellowship report. And so, we rented a car. We made calls. We arranged tours of several of the largest immigrant detention centers, as well as the adjoining agricultural sites where detainees labored in exchange for special judicial consideration. We observed, among other things, the hand-pollination sweeps that had become essential since the

extinction of bees in North America: detainees moving through orchards en masse, tickling blossoms into productivity. When Beaumont and I sat down to work on our report for the fellowship committee, we tried to communicate the surprising fact that desperation could be monetized. Detention centers were not mere stopgaps, but rather—as Americans deemed everything—opportunities.

The topic was a passion for neither of us, but it had gotten us overseas and closer to our personal ambitions. Like me, Beaumont had a career-making book in mind—his a "comedic novel of manners." He, too, was interested in interviewing Americans on topics beyond the scope of our fellowship. And so, in cafés and bodegas, mechanic shops and hair salons, we worked together to glean perspectives and opinions from a variety of citizenry. More than once, our inquiries made us minor celebrities in some small town: we would eat dinners at the mayor's house, deliver short speeches in school auditoriums, even appear on the local news.

Hard work was a palate cleanser. I hardly ever thought of Honey.

This might have continued—Beaumont and I might have finished the project together, returned amicably to our homeland—had my former landlady not called, one afternoon, while Beaumont and I paused at a petrol station in South Dakota. Apparently, no one had rented the room above the grocery in the weeks since I had departed; my landlady, Ms. Pancelli, had just gotten around to cleaning the premises.

"You left a stack of guidebooks," she said. "Should I mail them somewhere?"

I told her no—irritated by the question. I had left a note saying the guidebooks could be donated to a local school. Also, I was in a rush: en route to Pierre for an interview with a U.S. senator who was among the president's inner coterie—"the New Frontiersmen," as they were known. The interview had the potential to accelerate my understanding of America's broader ethos and inevitabilities, but Beaumont and I still had an hour left of driving. Every minute ticked closer to the scheduled meeting time.

Phone to my ear, I paced around a graffiti-riddled picnic table. Beaumont leaned against our rental car, parked in the shade of an awning. He made a wrap-it-up motion.

I prided myself on my politeness, however. And Ms. Pancelli, I had always thought, possessed a touch of the old country. "Thank you for checking," I said. "Very kind of you. Yet, I must—"

"Wait a sec . . ."

A chill crawled up my spine; Ms. Pancelli inhaled the way a person does before addressing a sensitive subject.

To Beaumont, I held up a finger.

"I almost wasn't going to mention it," said Ms. Pancelli, "but I thought you should know that after you left, a woman came by. Knocking and knocking on your door. And when no one answered, well, she went back outside and climbed up the drainpipe to what was your window on the second floor."

An eighteen-wheeler roared past the petrol station, making the whole earth shudder. A buzzing line of motorcycles followed, impossibly loud. Beaumont mouthed: *Come on.*

"The woman looked—she looked elderly," said Ms. Pancelli, who was elderly herself, though not in the way we were discussing: elderly yet able to shimmy up a drainpipe to a second-floor window.

I needed to end the call—to shake the conversation off— but I could not help asking what I already knew.

"Was she wearing a watch?" I said. "A gold one, too large for her wrist?"

DURING THE INTERVIEW with the South Dakota senator, my concentration flagged. Beaumont did all the talking, which was no trouble for him. He loved to talk. Hamming it up in the company of American egotists was as much of a joy to him as mocking them in private. By the end of the meeting, Beaumont had the senator extending an invitation to his ranch. The pair shook hands, both red-faced from bourbon. I twiddled my pen in the corner.

As we exited the statehouse, Beaumont confronted me. "What is going on with you?" he said. "Did you even—"

He grabbed my notepad, surveyed the blank tablet.

His fleshy face clouded. The timing of the interview had cost us the chance to attend a professional basketball game, to which a prior contact had given us free tickets. This had disappointed Beaumont greatly. He agreed to do the interview only because I insisted it would help us write our prospective books. The senator, I'd told Beaumont, was a mouthpiece for a presidential ideology that would bring America into focus—and with it, the fate of Europe, the whole world. Wasn't it *interesting* that the president deemed himself an infrastructuralist and an "architect of opportunity" while also disenfranchising millions? That he had jump-started the U.S. economy with far-reaching deregulatory mandates, alongside massive investments in space exploration and deep-sea extraction?

With Beaumont, I glossed over the more nuanced aspects of the president's reigning rhetoric, though they fascinated me. For instance, when flash points arose around commercial development in America's national parks—Yellowstone, Denali, Joshua Tree—the president calmly offered critics one of his catchphrases: *All's fair in love, war, and business*. His supporters then celebrated his creation of thousands of jobs. Yet the president was most emphatically hailed as a visionary with respect to his promotion of "the frontier of the self." He advocated for self-empowerment in the literal sense. *See yourself as an untapped resource*, he told Americans. *Find your bootstraps and pull them*. The idea was that any person, even those born into abject poverty, had a bounty of bodily resources at their disposal. Thus had the floodgates opened to legalized organ harvesting, a DNA market, penny stocks in small-time intellectual property, mind's-eye micro-cams, and, of course, consignment.

To the president's credit, America's GDP had soared—and at a juncture when the empire seemed doomed to fade the way most empires do, beleaguered by their own bigness. The American dream continued; no reason, yet, to wake up.

"You've got to get your head on straight," said Beaumont as we stood on the statehouse steps. "I don't know what's going on with you, but you can't fade away on me like that." I nodded, but my thoughts were with Honey—Honey as an old woman, climbing a drainpipe, looking for the lover who had promised consignment would change nothing.

A breeze rippled our suits, along with the row of regional and national flags positioned in front of the statehouse. A knot formed in my stomach—guilt twisting, tightening—and I reminded myself that Honey was an adult, capable of making her own choices. Was that not what America was all about: freedom of choice? This choice had been all hers.

Beaumont must have noticed the tension in my body, because his face softened. I had told him a vague outline of my time with Honey when he and I reunited; perhaps he recognized that romantic troubles were the source of my agitation. He could certainly relate to distresses of the heart. In our youth, I had listened to him cry out his feelings over many a botched liaison. More clown than Don Juan, he was always falling for women out of his league. While this had never been my particular problem, and was not my problem at that moment, I suppose I should have appreciated Beaumont's perceptiveness—though of course, at that time, it only felt like an intrusion.

"You know what?" he said, slapping me on the back. "I think we've been going too hard for too long. All work and no play, right?"

BEAUMONT DRAGGED ME to a windowless discotheque on the outskirts of Pierre. In the forever twilight of the building's interior, laser lights speared the air. Everywhere: bare legs, false eyelashes, wigs, television screens. Cocktail waitresses distributed vials of noxious neon alcohol. Music ricocheted between the dance floor and bar. Already I was sweating. I tried to turn around and leave, but Beaumont pushed me forward.

"You need this," he said. "We need this."

I told Beaumont I would stay for an hour. At his behest, I downed a few of the neon beverages, as well as a handful of pale pink tablets that a waitress promised would take the edge off ("And then the green ones add edges, if that's what you want"). From the bar, Beaumont purchased more drinks for a parade of spandex-clad dancers, some of whom fussed over our "adorable suits." One asked if we were Mormon. Another if our accents were Australian.

I glanced at my wrist to check the time—then remembered I no longer had a watch.

The knot in my stomach tightened. The drinks and the drugs had done little to aid my mood. The music crowed louder. Rainbow lights pulsed my eyes.

Beaumont leaned over from his bar stool. "Misty is going to request a song for us," he said—beaming at a twiggy woman in a bodysuit. When she left to find the DJ, he made a sad face at me. "Doing okay, old sport?"

The lights shifted to a stuttering silver blink. On the dance floor, everyone's face turned ghoulish, their eyes going hollow, bones pressing against skin, hair bleached white. I squinted, trying to see better—to see clearly—whether these dancers with their heels and bare midriffs, all grinding and leaping and drinking, were in fact young people in the bodies of the elderly. Had they been that way the whole time?

Then the light changed once more: softening to a mellow gold. Everyone again appeared young—or youngish. It had been a trick of the light, what I had seen. Beaumont sat beside me at the bar, tapping his foot, peering around for Misty.

And yet, it occurred to me that any of these people could be anyone else—at least externally—through consignment.

To Beaumont, I yelled over the music: "Do you ever wonder whether someone is truly who they seem to be? Or if they . . ."

"What?"

"Because of consignment," I said. "And—"

Misty was back. She took Beaumont's hand and led him into a fray of dancers. The pair bobbed and laughed; Beaumont's suit jacket rose like a cape when he twirled.

I got up from the bar intending to find the exit, then to get a ride to our hotel—but I could not find my way out. Dancers crowded every corner. The music blared too loud. The drinks and the drugs had muddled my navigational abilities, though I also would not have been surprised if the discotheque was intentionally designed to keep people inside.

Eventually, I found an unoccupied corridor. I wandered down it, relieved to put distance between myself and the music, the sweaty heat. No exit materialized, but an open doorway revealed the back room where workers took breaks. A bartender sipped water and sullenly watched a TV. On-screen, a news crew enthusiastically surveyed the latest presidential infrastructure initiative: One Big Lake.

The plan, evidently, was for all of America's Great Lakes to be bulldozed into one giant body of water.

"This new lake will be a symbol of unity," said a spokesperson as she posed beside a row of supporters and construction equipment on the shores of Lake Erie. "It will also create jobs. Most importantly, it will show that America is the greatest nation in the world—not just home to Great Lakes, but the Greatest Lake."

"Like we need to," muttered the bartender, in a tone I could not read.

On-screen, supporters chanted: *One big lake! One big lake! One big lake!*

The sheer nonsense of this country. I swallowed more of the pale pink pills I had acquired earlier, as well as a green one. Returning to the dance floor, I let the mass of bodies consume me: a democratic tide sweeping me in. Soon, Beaumont had his arm over my shoulders, his suit jacket long since peeled away. Misty twirled me. It felt as though someone had pressed a mute button on my brain; beneath the blinking lights, the writhing bodies were no one and everyone—everymans and everywomans and everypersons—sweaty and drunk and dumb and so damn powerful.

THE DREAM GOES like this: in America, anything is possible.

A sun-bright golf course spreads in undulating plains of viridescent lawn. A pair of twentysomethings in golf sweaters tip their caps. A third bends at the waist, club in hand, as he slowly, painstakingly, lines up his drive.

Farther on, beyond a row of swaying willows and a swan pond, sits a sprawling manor. *Cheshire Valley Luxury Retirement Village*, reads a sign. And in smaller letters: "*Because you earned it*."

In the dream: if you work hard enough, paradise can be yours.

And, truly, inside the retirement village there are dozens of otter-sleek youths. Rosy-cheeked, dewy-lipped. Hair flipped and flopped. Hands smooth, necks smooth, legs smooth. They lounge by the pool; they gaze at themselves, at each other.

These youths: playing bridge. Shuffleboard. Napping. Knitting. Staying active.

A retirement home full of beauties, all dazzling right up until the end, dying like flames burning out. Because the end remains inevitable. Consignment is a purely cosmetic procedure; there are no known health benefits—except, perhaps, healthy self-regard: youth no longer wasted on the young.

I WOKE UP gasping.

A bedside clock blinked red digits: 11:40 a.m. I was in a hotel room, though not my own. A body breathed next to me—long hair mobbing the pillow—but I did not bother to see who it was. I burst from the bed, scrambled to find my clothes. My mouth was cottony. My head zizzed. Half dressed, I lurched into the hotel hallway, holding my shoes.

Beaumont—recently showered and well coiffed—stood by the elevator door.

"Look who finally showed up," he said cheerily. "You smell like a—"

"I'm not in the mood, Beau," I said, stepping up beside him. "I just want to go back to the room."

The elevator door opened, but Beaumont blocked my path. He smiled as if this were a funny coincidence. "Excuse me," he said, "for showing you a good time."

I grunted, tried to circumvent him, but he stayed put.

"And for paying for all of your drinks—and pills—of which you enjoyed many."

"I never asked for you to—"

"Also for covering your tips. You seemed to have forgotten that particular American custom, despite all your 'research' on this nation's traditions."

That really touched a nerve. I glared at Beaumont, before replying in a cold voice: "I did not even want to go out."

Again, I attempted to push past him—and again he refused to move. His false smile fell away.

"That's the thing about you, Alexis. You take everything for granted. And you take whatever you want."

Beaumont's lower lip trembled. He always became like this—emotionally volatile, unfairly angry—when his own inadequacies reared into view. That was what had happened in Boston, when we first parted ways. A particularly charming MIT postdoc had scorned his try-hard jokes in favor of my casual bons mots. And while it would have been easy enough, there in front of the elevator, to stroke Beaumont's bruised ego—and get us back on track—I did not have the energy to do so.

"Can we discuss this another time?" I said.

Too late—Beaumont was staring over my shoulder, back at the hotel room I had exited. The door had opened and the person with whom I had spent the night poked out her head.

"Misty?" Beaumont said, his eyes widening.

Whether what came next was intentional or an uncontrolled spasm, I cannot say; what is certain is that Beaumont's open palm struck my face.

BEAUMONT AND I parted ways again, this time for good. I suppose it was fortunate we had written enough of our fellowship report to turn in a sloppy draft, technically fulfilling the task we had set out to accomplish. The fellowship committee, however, did not send back its best regards or offer to fund an extended stay in America. Beaumont returned to Europe, but I could not bring myself to leave. I still had the idea that I might write a book—and that such a book had the capacity to launch my career as a preeminent cultural analyst by offering the world an unprecedented study of America, one that would serve global leaders and civilians alike.

But my understanding of the country had only grown murkier since I'd arrived. America made less sense by the day.

To further complicate matters, my nose was broken, and I had a complexion on which black eyes lingered. Interview subjects found this

off-putting. Also, I had underestimated the research benefits of Beaumont's showy bonhomie. Always fake to me, he had clearly charmed Americans—compulsive smilers themselves.

Suffice it to say, I made little headway in my research efforts after Beaumont left.

Worse, my funds were gone. I suppose I could have called family members, begged, but that would have required pledging allegiance to one or another side in familial disputes that went back generations: messy business of which I wanted no part.

I had to find paid work. It was thus I joined America's sea of itinerant laborers, earning pay under the table as a dishwasher, ticket seller, sign holder, and marijuana harvester, among other roles. It occurred to me, in a cloud of dark humor, that with my state-sponsored visa expired, I could wind up in one of the detention centers I had come to America to study. For all of the nation's deregulatory initiatives—its promise of individual empowerment—the state could be punishingly restrictive.

I was no closer to making sense of what this meant. The ad hoc labor, meanwhile, made book-writing near impossible. Also, my new habit of taking the pale pink pills I had first imbibed at the club with Beaumont did little to aid my mental clarity.

The most significant impediment, however, was that I kept seeing Honey. Or more specifically: I kept seeing strangers and wondering if Honey's heart and brain and bone—Honey herself—was inside them. She could have been anyone by that point. Most likely she remained in the elderly body she had traded for start-up funds. But she might have made a little money, purchased herself a middle-aged body. Maybe she had somehow struck it rich: bought a young exterior—not her own, but someone who looked like her.

There was no way to know, though, unless she revealed herself.

All I could do was stare at strangers—on the bus, on street corners, in the dishrooms where I scraped plates clean—and imagine I was seeing Honey, that I might find a sense of peace if only I could explain to her the true contours of the situation.

Consignment was your choice to make—not mine.

You knew from the beginning that I was planning to move on for my research.

If anyone has suffered, it is me. Do you see the state I am in? How far I have been reduced? I was making excellent headway on my book; you threw me completely off course.

But these statements rang hollow even in my own imagination. I knew that if I ever encountered Honey again, I'd likely feel too overcome by shame to say much of anything at all. It was lucky I probably never would.

Except then—several months after Beaumont left—I did.

BY THAT TIME, I had secured a job on an American cruise ship. The whole story is too long to tell in full, so let me say only that after a close call with U.S. immigration authorities, I signed on with the cruise line, taking advantage of a regulatory loophole for foreign workers at sea.

Pushing off from American shores, I hoped, would also grant me the perspective I needed to finally write my book.

My tasks on the ship were mundane and manifold but mostly involved cleaning. The captain held an ardent conviction in the purifying capacity of bleach. The work might have been called humiliating, chemically dangerous, but I was glad to be kept busy—even to be barked at by my supervisor—if only to distract my tormented mind.

The cruise ship's clientele was largely composed of the American nouveaux riches. Guests were wealthy enough to afford extended vacations, designer clothing, but not yet beyond the notion that enormous cruise ships offered a respectable form of leisure. They piled into their well-bleached cabins as families with matching luggage, or as couples pawing at one another, or as packs of friends—women mostly, bedecked in ruffled dresses, strappy sandals, sunglasses—who had gathered to impress and provoke one another.

The cruise line's selling point was that it took people to what was already gone. The marketing went like this: *What if a cruise could transport you to the most exclusive location imaginable: a place that cannot be reached by air, or car, or even other ships? A place that cannot be reached because it no longer exists?* To explain the conceit plainly: by using the latest holographic technology—and a suite of high-powered projectors—the cruise line re-created vanished locales. Thus, the ship seemed to sail past low-lying Caribbean islands—bird-covered, dolphin-splashed—that had been swallowed by rising seas. When the ship cut through the Panama Canal, the impression of a rain forest was projected on all sides. The truth of the canal—widened, industrialized, polluted—was obscured. *What's gone doesn't have to be! Live the Dream, the Myth, the Miracle!*

The cruise line was always making "Best of" lists.

It was near the end of a voyage that culminated with an illusional

Alaskan ice floe that I saw Honey. I rarely worked front-of-house, but after a server dropped a tray of champagne glasses and toppled a flaming birthday cake, extra hands were needed for the cleanup efforts.

This particular incident had taken place in a guest lounge, lush with chandeliers that tinkled softly as the cruise ship made its slow heaves through the North Pacific. A group of young ladies lay sprawled on velvet divans, exhausted from doing nothing. They looked like Roman noblewomen, draped in silks and jewelry. A particularly wealthy set,: this clutch of friends. All of them smooth-faced, shiny-haired, firm-bodied. A few watched the cleanup efforts with casual concern, though most ignored us workers, instead chatting together, laughing and bragging, throwing back more champagne. It was late and everyone was nearing intoxication; guests tended to drink more as the voyages wore on, and this was the final night.

I broomed a bit of birthday cake into a pan. When I looked up—to tell another worker we would need solvents for the frosting—I saw Honey.

She lounged amid the others, dressed like them in white silk and gold jewelry. She brought a vaporizer to her mouth, exhaled a plume of lavender smoke. Her hair had been teased high on her head, her eyes kohl-rimmed. Her face was sharper around the cheekbones, lips reddened, but I knew it was Honey. Not a hallucination—a speculation—but her in the flesh.

No, I reminded myself: this was Honey's flesh, but not Honey. The woman inside was not her.

And yet, not-Honey regarded me levelly.

I continued cleaning, but the broom shook in my hands. The other workers bustled around me. I glanced back at not-Honey: watching me as she lay stretched upon the divan. She took another long drag on her vaporizer.

The ship's bell sounded, alerting the guests to the nearness of our upcoming viewpoint—the last viewpoint, since the cruise would end tomorrow. There was a flurry of excitement. The other workers rushed to prepare the upper deck for passengers. Passengers rushed to their cabins to don warmer garments for the chilled air outside.

Only not-Honey remained unmoved.

She's probably tired, aching inside, I thought. Old bones.

She patted the ottoman beside her divan, maintaining eye contact all the while.

I went to her; in the rush of activity, no one seemed to notice. The ship swayed, chandeliers jingling like faraway laughter. I felt clumsy—oversized and gangly—as I sat down. I could not keep my eyes from her: this woman I had abandoned, looking radiant as she exhaled another lavender plume.

"Staring isn't polite," she said—in an unfamiliar voice, a voice that was not Honey's but deeper, gravelly with smoke and cynicism.

"Hard not to," I replied, because this was the truth.

A smirk crept over not-Honey's face. She must have intuited what I was thinking—that this exterior was the product of consignment—and she moved a hand to one of her breasts and squeezed it, as if to mock me.

"Worth every penny," she said.

I wanted to slap myself. I would get fired, cavorting with guests. And then what would I do? Return to my homeland empty-handed—a disgraced researcher? I would have nothing to show for my time in America except a half-formed book proposal and a ravaged conscience.

In my peripheral vision, bodies filtered in and out of the lounge, their voices a low murmur. Not-Honey exhaled more vapor and I sucked in a lungful—hoping it might numb my mind blank. Instead, a vast longing rose within me. The months since Beaumont had left had been lonely ones. I craved companionship—Honey's companionship, specifically. I missed her body, yes, but more than that I missed her grace and her gumption, even her small-time criminality. I missed the woman I'd chosen to leave.

Unable to resist, I reached out and took her hand.

"You certainly are forward," said not-Honey, though she did not withdraw. Rather, her eyes glittered; she was hideously beautiful.

My heart quailed. I glanced away—my gaze landing on the hand I had taken in my own: fingers ring-covered, elegant. I had heard that hands were the most difficult part of the consignment process to transfer. There was less fatty tissue to manipulate; scars could show up there afterward. But in the dim light of the lounge, I could see no scars. This woman must have had an advanced AI surgeon, been extra rich.

Or—a wild swell of hope hit me—this was Honey herself. The scenario was a long shot, and yet: might she be playing a game with me? Performing a lover's test? Why else would she be on this cruise ship, of all cruise ships, speaking with me now?

I studied her face again, my conviction mounting. A theory unspooled: perhaps Honey had been deemed unfit for consignment at the

last minute. The operation's front—the travel agency—might have connected her with a wealthy widow who wanted travel companions: hence her presence on the cruise. And the elderly woman my landlady had seen climbing the drainpipe? That could have been one of Honey's sisters. Was it so impossible that Honey—loyal, generous Honey—could have given the watch to one of them?

I opened my mouth to reveal my understanding, but another bell sounded. The cruise ship had reached its final viewing point. From across the lounge, a voice called: "Are you coming? It's about to start."

My lost love withdrew her hand, pressed herself upright on the divan.

"Wait," I said. "Honey?"

She rose all the way to her feet, her silks draped around her, her gaze penetrating the dim distance of the lounge. More to herself than to me, she smiled softly—perhaps even a little sadly—and so I said her name once more, made the word a plea: *Honey.*

This time she answered, "Yes, darling?" and gestured for us to make our way to the ship's deck, as if this were where we had always been going, where we had always planned to be.

THE CRUISE SHIP'S deck was crowded with passengers. Everyone oohed at the projected visuals: the ice floe superimposed over iceless water, sculptural forms sparkling with the flickering colors of an artificial aurora borealis.

Honey leaned against me. She had asked that I carry her up the stairs to the ship's deck, saying she was tired—and I had been glad to do so, feeling heroic with her arms wrapped around my neck, her head on my shoulder, her body surprisingly light.

On the deck, my heart thrummed. I pulled Honey closer, even as—out of the corner of my eye—I saw my supervisor stalking the viewing platform.

I must have known, on some level, that I would soon be apprehended: an employee gone rogue. I had crossed a line I could not cross back. I would be fired and deported to my home country—if not immediately, then after a series of holding cells, paperwork, phone calls. Pleas. Fines. But this expulsion would turn out to be exactly what I needed, at least in one sense. Because by being made to leave America, I would finally grasp the truth of the country: America was a paradise no one could truly enter, a land of smoke and mirrors, a dream induced by the heady drugs of our greatest expectations. To wake from that dream is to see the brutal bed

one has slept in—is to understand that the country has always been a figment of one's own mind.

This realization would allow me to write my book—the book I'd been striving to write during the whole of my journey—though the fact of the book's existence today brings me no joy. Even the book's ongoing success does little for me. In the years since departing America, I have found myself seated beside presidents, monarchs, celebrities, and CEOs—but I would give it all up to have Honey in my arms again. I would do anything for a few more minutes on that ship.

Honey pressed herself against me, while the ice floe glistened around us. Northern lights dazzled the skies. Belugas surged through crystal waters. A national song began to play, as was customary for the end of a voyage, but it seemed as if the song played for only us. Then fireworks broke open over the ocean like beguiling bombs. I leaned in and kissed Honey, warming her hands in my own. For that instant, paradise was ours: America the beautiful, from sea to shining sea.