THE CIRCLE

a novel

DAVE EGGERS

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There wasn’t any limit, no boundary at all, to the future. And it would be so a man wouldn’t have room to store his happiness.

JOHN STEINBECK
East of Eden

MY GOD, MAE thought. It's heaven.

The campus was vast and rambling, wild with Pacific color, and yet the smallest detail had been carefully considered, shaped by the most eloquent hands. On land that had once been a shipyard, then a drive-in movie theater, then a flea market, then blight, there were now soft green hills and a Calatrava fountain. And a picnic area, with tables arranged in concentric circles. And tennis courts, clay and grass. And a volleyball court, where tiny children from the company's daycare center were running, squealing, weaving like water. Amid all this was a workplace, too, four hundred acres of brushed steel and glass on the headquarters of the most influential company in the world. The sky above was spotless and blue.

Mae was making her way through all of this, walking from the parking lot to the main hall, trying to look as if she belonged. The walkway wound around lemon and orange trees and its quiet red cobblestones were replaced, occasionally, by tiles with imploring messages of inspiration. "Dream," one said, the word laser-cut into the red stone. "Participate," said another. There were dozens: "Find Community." "Innovate." "Imagine." She just missed stepping on the hand of a young man in a grey jumpsuit; he was installing a new stone that said "Breathe."

On a sunny Monday in June, Mae stopped in front of the main door, standing below the logo etched into the glass above. Though the company was less than six years old, its name and logo—a circle surrounding a knitted grid, with a small 'c' in the center—were already among the best-known in the world. There were over ten thousand employees on this, the main campus, but the Circle had offices all over the globe, and was hiring hundreds of gifted young minds every week. It had been voted the world's most admired company four years running.

Mae wouldn't have thought she had a chance to work at such a place, but for Annie. Annie was two years older and they'd roomed together for three semesters in college, in an ugly building made habitable through their extraordinary bond, something like friends, something like sisters or cousins who wished they were siblings and would have reason never to be apart. Their first month living together, Mae had broken her jaw one twilight, after fainting, flu-ridden and underfed, during finals. Annie had told her to stay in bed, but Mae had gone to the 7-Eleven for caffeine and woke up on the sidewalk, under a tree. Annie took her to the hospital, and waited as they wired her jaw, and then stayed with Mae, sleeping next to her, in a wooden chair, all night, and then at home, for days, had fed Mae through a straw. It was a fierce level of commitment and competence that Mae had never seen from someone her age or near her age, and Mae was thereafter loyal in a way she'd never known she could be.

While Mae was still at Carleton, meandering between majors, from art history to marketing to psychology—getting her degree in psych with no plans to go further in the field—Annie had graduated, gotten her MBA from Stanford and was recruited everywhere, but particularly at the Circle, and had landed here days after graduation. Now she had some lofty title—Director of Ensuring the Future, Annie joked—and had urged Mae to apply for a job. Mae did so, and though Annie insisted she pulled no strings, Mae was sure that Annie had, and she felt indebted beyond all measure. A million people, a billion, wanted to be where Mae was at this moment, entering this atrium, thirty feet high and shot through with California light, on her first day working for the only company that really mattered at all.

She pushed open the heavy door. The front hall was as long as a parade, as tall as a cathedral. There were offices everywhere above, four floors high on either side, every wall made of glass. Briefly dizzy, she looked downward, and in the immaculate glossy floor, she saw her

own face reflected, looking worried. She shaped her mouth into a smile, feeling a presence behind her.

"You must be Mae."

Mae turned to find a beautiful young head floating atop a scarlet scarf and white silk blouse.

"I'm Renata," she said.

"Hi Renata. I'm looking for—"

"Annie. I know. She's on her way." A sound, a digital droplet, came from Renata's ear. "She's actually …" Renata was looking at Mae but was seeing something else. Retinal interface, Mae assumed. Another innovation born here.

"She's in the Old West," Renata said, focusing on Mae again, "but she'll be here soon."

Mae smiled. "I hope she's got some hardtack and a sturdy horse."

Renata smiled politely but did not laugh. Mae knew the company's practice of naming each portion of the campus after an historical era; it was a way to make an enormous place less impersonal, less corporate. It beat Building 3B-East, where Mae had last worked. Her last day at the public utility in her hometown had been only three weeks ago—they'd been stupefied when she gave notice—but already it seemed impossible she'd wasted so much of her life there. Good riddance, Mae thought, to that gulag and all it represented.

Renata was still getting signals from her earpiece. "Oh wait," she said, "now she's saying she's still tied up over there." Renata looked at Mae with a radiant smile. "Why don't I take you to your desk? She says she'll meet you there in an hour or so."

Mae thrilled a bit at those words, *your desk*, and immediately she thought of her dad. He was proud. *So proud*, he'd said on her voicemail; he must have left the message at four a.m. She'd gotten it when she'd woken up. *So very proud*, he'd said, choking up. Mae was two years out of college and here she was, gainfully employed by the Circle, with her own health insurance, her own apartment in the city, being no burden to her parents, who had plenty else to worry about.

Mae followed Renata out of the atrium. On the lawn, under dappled light, a pair of young people were sitting on a manmade hill, holding some kind of clear tablet, talking with great intensity.

"You'll be in the Renaissance, over here," Renata said, pointing across the lawn, to a building of glass and oxidized copper. "This is where all the Customer Experience people are. You've visited before?"

Mae nodded. "I have. A few times, but not this building."

"So you've seen the pool, the sports area." Renata waved her hand off toward a blue parallelogram and an angular building, the gym, rising behind it. "Over there there's the yoga studio, crossfit, Pilates, massages, spinning. I heard you spin? Behind that there's the bocce courts, and the new tetherball setup. The cafeteria's just across the grass …" Renata pointed to the lush rolling green, with a handful of young people, dressed professionally and splayed about like sunbathers. "And here we are."

They stood before the Renaissance, another building with a forty-foot atrium, a Calder mobile turning slowly above.

"Oh, I love Calder," Mae said.

Renata smiled. "I know you do." They looked up at it together. "This one used to hang in the French parliament. Something like that."

The wind that had followed them in now turned the mobile such that an arm pointed to

Mae, as if welcoming her personally. Renata took her elbow. “Ready? Up this way.”

They entered an elevator of glass, tinted faintly orange. Lights flickered on and Mae saw her name appear on the walls, along with her high school yearbook photo. WELCOME MAE HOLLAND. A sound, something like a gasp, left Mae’s throat. She hadn’t seen that photo in years, and had been happy for its absence. This must have been Annie’s doing, assaulting her with it again. The picture was indeed Mae—her wide mouth, her thin lips, her olive skin, her black hair, but in this photo, more so than in life, her high cheekbones gave her a look of severity, her brown eyes not smiling, only small and cold, ready for war. Since the photo—she was eighteen then, angry and unsure—Mae had gained much-needed weight, her face had softened and curves appeared, curves that brought the attention of men of myriad ages and motives. She’d tried, since high school, to be more open, more accepting, and seeing it here, this document of a long-ago era when she assumed the worst of the world, rattled her. Just when she couldn’t stand it anymore, the photo disappeared.

“Yeah, everything’s on sensors,” Renata said. “The elevator reads your ID, and then says hello. Annie gave us that photo. You guys must be tight if she’s got high school pictures of you. Anyway, hope you don’t mind. We do that for visitors, mostly. They’re usually impressed.”

As the elevator rose, the day’s featured activities appeared on every elevator wall, the images and text traveling from one panel to the next. With each announcement, there was video, photos, animation, music. There was a screening of *Koyaanisqatsi* at noon, a self-massage demonstration at one, core strengthening at three. A congressman Mae hadn’t heard of, grey-haired but young, was holding a town hall at six thirty. On the elevator door, he was talking at a podium, somewhere else, flags rippling behind him, his shirtsleeves rolled up and his hands shaped into earnest fists.

The doors opened, splitting the congressman in two.

“Here we are,” Renata said, stepping out to a narrow catwalk of steel grating. Mae looked down and felt her stomach cinch. She could see all the way to the ground floor, four stories below.

Mae attempted levity: “I guess you don’t put anyone with vertigo up here.”

Renata stopped and turned to Mae, looking gravely concerned. “Of course not. But your profile said—”

“No, no,” Mae said. “I’m fine.”

“Seriously. We can put you lower if—”

“No, no. Really. It’s perfect. Sorry. I was making a joke.”

Renata was visibly shaken. “Okay. Just let me know if anything’s not right.”

“I will.”

“You will? Because Annie would want me to make sure.”

“I will. I promise,” Mae said, and smiled at Renata, who recovered and moved on.

The catwalk reached the main floor, wide and windowed and bisected by a long hallway. On either side, the offices were fronted by floor-to-ceiling glass, the occupants visible within. Each had decorated his or her space elaborately but tastefully—one office full of sailing paraphernalia, most of it seeming airborne, hanging from the exposed beams, another arrayed with bonsai trees. They passed a small kitchen, the cabinets and shelves all glass, the cutlery magnetic, attached to the refrigerator in a tidy grid, everything illuminated by a vast hand-blown chandelier aglow with multicolored bulbs, its arms reaching out in orange and peach and pink.

“Okay, here you are.”

They stopped at a cubicle, grey and small and lined with a material like synthetic linen.

Mae's heart faltered. It was almost precisely like the cubicle she'd worked at for the last eighteen months. It was the first thing she'd seen at the Circle that hadn't been rethought, that bore any resemblance to the past. The material lining the cubicle walls was—she couldn't believe it, it didn't seem possible—burlap.

Mae knew Renata was watching her, and she knew her face was betraying something like horror. *Smile*, she thought. *Smile*.

"This okay?" Renata said, her eyes darting all over Mae's face.

Mae forced her mouth to indicate some level of satisfaction. "Great. Looks good."

This was not what she expected.

"Okay then. I'll leave you to get yourself acquainted with the workspace, and Denise and Josiah will be in soon to orient you and get you set up."

Mae twisted her mouth into a smile again, and Renata turned and left. Mae sat, noting that the back of the chair was half-broken, that the chair would not move, its wheels seeming stuck, all of them. A computer had been placed on the desk, but it was an ancient model she hadn't seen anywhere else in the building. Mae was baffled, and found her mood sinking into the same sort of abyss in which she'd spent the last few years.

Did anyone really work at a utility company anymore? How had Mae come to work there? How had she tolerated it? When people had asked where she worked, she was more inclined to lie and say she was unemployed. Would it have been any better if it hadn't been in her hometown?

After six or so years of loathing her hometown, of cursing her parents for moving there and subjecting her to it, its limitations and scarcity of everything—diversion, restaurants, enlightened minds—Mae had recently come to remember Longfield with something like tenderness. It was a small town between Fresno and Tranquillity, incorporated and named by a literal-minded farmer in 1866. One hundred and fifty years later, its population had peaked at just under two thousand souls, most of them working in Fresno, twenty miles away. Longfield was a cheap place to live, and the parents of Mae's friends were security guards, teachers, truckers who liked to hunt. Of Mae's graduating class of eighty-one, she was one of twelve to go to a four-year college, and the only one to go east of Colorado. That she went so far, and went into such debt, only to come back and work at the local utility, shredded her, and her parents, though outwardly they said she was doing the right thing, taking a solid opportunity and getting started in paying down her loans.

The utility building, 3B-East, was a tragic block of cement with narrow vertical slits for windows. Inside, most of the offices were walled with cinderblock, everything painted a sickly green. It was like working in a locker room. She'd been the youngest person in the building by a decade or so, and even those in their thirties were of a different century. They marveled at her computer skills, which were basic and common to anyone she knew. But her coworkers at the utility were astounded. They called her the *Black Lightning*, some wilted reference to her hair, and told her she had *quite a bright future* at the utility if she played her cards right. In four or five years, they told her, she could be head of IT for the whole sub-station! Her exasperation was unbounded. She had not gone to college, $234,000 worth of elite liberal arts education, for a job like that. But it was work, and she needed the money. Her student loans were voracious and demanded monthly feedings, so she took the job and the paycheck and kept her eyes open for greener pastures.

Her immediate supervisor was a man named Kevin, who served as the ostensible technology officer at the utility, but who, in a strange twist, happened to know nothing about

technology. He knew cables, splitters; he should have been operating a ham radio in his basement—not supervising Mae. Every day, every month, he wore the same short-sleeved button-down, the same rust-colored ties. He was an awful assault on the senses, his breath smelling of ham and his mustache furry and wayward, like two small paws emerging, southwest and southeast, from his ever-flared nostrils.

All this would have been fine, his many offenses, but for the fact that he actually believed that Mae cared. He believed that Mae, graduate of Carleton, dreamer of rare and golden dreams, cared about this job at the gas and electric utility. That she would be worried if Kevin considered her performance on any given day subpar. It drove her mad.

The times he would ask her to come in, when he would close his door and sit at the corner of his desk—they were excruciating. *Do you know why you're here?* he would ask, like a highway cop who'd pulled her over. Other times, when he was satisfied with whatever work she'd done that day, he did something worse: he *praised* her. He called her his *protégée*. He loved the word. He introduced her to visitors this way, saying, "This is my protégée, Mae. She's pretty sharp, most days"—and here he'd wink at her as if he were a captain and she his first mate, the two of them veterans of many raucous adventures and forever devoted to each other. "If she doesn't get in her own way, she has a bright future ahead of her here."

She couldn't stand it. Every day of that job, the eighteen months she worked there, she wondered if she could really ask Annie for a favor. She'd never been one to ask for something like that, to be rescued, to be lifted. It was a kind of neediness, pushiness—*nudginess*, her dad called it, something not bred into her. Her parents were quiet people who did not like to be in anyone's way, quiet and proud people who took nothing from anyone.

And Mae was the same, but that job bent her into something else, into someone who would do anything to leave. It was sickening, all of it. The green cinderblocks. An actual water cooler. Actual punch cards. The actual *certificates of merit* when someone had done something deemed special. And the hours! Actually nine to five! All of it felt like something from another time, a rightfully forgotten time, and made Mae feel that she was not only wasting her life but that this entire company was wasting life, wasting human potential and holding back the turning of the globe. The cubicle at that place, *her* cubicle, was the distillation of it all. The low walls around her, meant to facilitate her complete concentration on the work at hand, were lined with burlap, as if any other material might distract her, might allude to more exotic ways of spending her days. And so she'd spent eighteen months in an office where they thought, of all the materials man and nature offered, the one their staff should see, all day and every day, was burlap. A dirty sort of burlap, a less refined form of burlap. A bulk burlap, a poor man's burlap, a budget burlap. Oh god, she thought, when she left that place she vowed never to see or touch or acknowledge the existence of that material again.

And she did not expect to see it again. How often, outside of the nineteenth century, outside a general store of the nineteenth century, does one encounter burlap? Mae assumed she never would, but then here it was, all around her in this new Circle workspace, and looking at it, smelling its musty smell, her eyes welled up. "Fucking burlap," she mumbled to herself.

Behind her, she heard a sigh, then a voice: "Now I'm thinking this wasn't such a good idea."

Mae turned and found Annie, her hands in fists at her sides, posing like a pouting child. "Fucking burlap," Annie said, imitating her pout, then burst out laughing. When she was done, she managed, "That was incredible. Thank you so much for that, Mae. I knew you'd hate it, but I wanted to see just how much. I'm sorry you almost cried. Jesus."

Now Mae looked to Renata, whose hands were raised high in surrender. “Not my idea!” she said. “Annie put me up to it! Don’t hate me!”

Annie sighed with satisfaction. “I had to actually *buy* that cubicle from Walmart. And the computer! That took me ages to find online. I thought we could just bring that kind of stuff up from the basement or something, but we honestly had nothing on the entire campus ugly and old enough. Oh god, you should have seen your face.”

Mae’s heart was pounding. “You’re such a sicko.”

Annie feigned confusion. “Me? I’m not sick. I’m awesome.”

“I can’t believe you went to that much trouble to upset me.”

“Well, I did. That’s how I got to where I am now. It’s all about planning and it’s all about follow-through.” She gave Mae a salesman’s wink and Mae couldn’t help but laugh. Annie was a lunatic. “Now let’s go. I’m giving you the full tour.”

As Mae followed her, she had to remind herself that Annie had not always been a senior executive at a company like the Circle. There was a time, only four years ago, when Annie was a college student who wore men’s flannel housepants to class, to dinner, on casual dates. Annie was what one of her boyfriends, and there were many, always monogamous, always decent, called a *doofus*. But she could afford to be. She came from money, generations of money, and was very cute, dimpled and long-lashed, with hair so blond it could only be real. She was known by all as effervescent, seemed incapable of letting anything bother her for more than a few moments. But she was also a doofus. She was gangly, and used her hands wildly, dangerously, when she spoke, and was given to bizarre conversational tangents and strange obsessions—caves, amateur perfumery, doo-wop music. She was friendly with every one of her exes, with every hookup, with every professor (she knew them all personally and sent them gifts). She had been involved in, or ran, most or all of the clubs and causes in college, and yet she’d found time to be committed to her coursework—to everything, really—while also, at any party, being the most likely to embarrass herself to loosen everyone up, the last to leave. The one rational explanation for all this would have been that she did not sleep, but this was not the case. She slept decadently, eight to ten hours a day, could sleep anywhere—on a three-minute car ride, in the filthy booth of an off-campus diner, on anyone’s couch, at any time.

Mae knew this firsthand, having been something of a chauffeur to Annie on long rides, throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin and Iowa, to countless and largely meaningless cross-country contests. Mae had gotten a partial scholarship to run at Carleton, and that’s where she met Annie, who was effortlessly good, two years older, but was only intermittently concerned with whether she, or the team, won or lost. One meet Annie would be deep in it, taunting the opponents, insulting their uniforms or SATs, and the next she’d be wholly uninterested in the outcome but happy to be along for the ride. It was on the long rides, in Annie’s car—which she preferred Mae to drive—that Annie would put her bare feet up or out the window, and would riff on the passing scenery, and would speculate, for hours, on what went on in the bedroom of their coaches, a married couple with matching, almost military, haircuts. Mae laughed at everything Annie said, and it kept Mae’s mind off the meets, where she, unlike Annie, had to win, or at least do well, to justify the subsidy the college had provided her. They would invariably arrive minutes before the meet, with Annie having forgotten what race she was meant to run, or whether she really wanted to run at all.

And so how was this possible, that this scattershot and ridiculous person, who still carried a piece of her childhood blanket around in her pocket, had risen so quickly and high through the Circle? Now she was part of the forty most crucial minds at the company—the Gang of

40—privy to its most secret plans and data. That she could push through the hiring of Mae without breaking a sweat? That she could set it all up within weeks of Mae finally swallowing all pride and making the ask? It was a testament to Annie's inner will, some mysterious and core sense of destiny. Outwardly, Annie showed no signs of garish ambition, but Mae was sure that there was something within Annie that insisted upon this, that she would have been here, in this position, no matter where she'd come from. If she'd grown up in the Siberian tundra, born blind to shepherds, she still would have arrived here, now.

"Thanks Annie," she heard herself say.

They'd walked past a few conference rooms and lounges and were passing through the company's new gallery, where a half-dozen Basquiats hung, just acquired from a near-broke museum in Miami.

"Whatever," Annie said. "And I'm sorry you're in Customer Experience. I know that sounds shitty, but I will have you know that about half the company's senior people started there. Do you believe me?"

"I do."

"Good, because it's true."

They left the gallery and entered the second-floor cafeteria—"The Glass Eatery, I know it's such a terrible name," Annie said—designed such that diners ate at nine different levels, all of the floors and walls glass. At first glance, it looked like a hundred people were eating in mid-air.

They moved through the Borrow Room, where anything from bicycles to telescopes to hang gliders were loaned, for free, to anyone on staff, and onto the aquarium, a project championed by one of the founders. They stood before a display, as tall as themselves, where jellyfish, ghostly and slow, rose and fell with no apparent pattern or reason.

"I'll be watching you," Annie said, "and every time you do something great I'll be making sure everyone knows about it so you won't have to stay there too long. People move up here pretty reliably, and as you know we hire almost exclusively from within. So just do well and keep your head down and you'll be shocked at how quickly you'll be out of Customer Experience and into something juicy."

Mae looked into Annie's eyes, bright in the aquarium light. "Don't worry. I'm happy to be anywhere here."

"Better to be at the bottom of a ladder you want to climb than in the middle of some ladder you don't, right? Some shitty-ass ladder made of shit?"

Mae laughed. It was the shock of hearing such filth coming from such a sweet face. "Did you always curse this much? I don't remember that part of you."

"I do it when I'm tired, which is pretty much always."

"You used to be such a sweet girl."

"Sorry. I'm fucking sorry Mae! Jesus fucking Christ, Mae! Okay. Let's see more stuff. The kennel!"

"Are we working at all today?" Mae asked.

"Working? This *is* working. This is what you're tasked with doing the first day: getting to know the place, the people, getting acclimated. You know how when you put new wood floors into your house—"

"No, I don't."

"Well, when you do, you first have to let them sit there for ten days, to get the wood acclimated. Then you do the installation."

"So in this analogy, I'm the wood?"

"You are the wood."

"And then I'll be installed."

"Yes, we will then install you. We'll hammer you with ten thousands tiny nails. You'll love it."

They visited the kennel, a brainchild of Annie, whose dog, Dr. Kinsmann, had just passed on, but who had spent a few very happy years here, never far from his owner. Why should thousands of employees all leave their dogs at home when they could be brought here, to be around people, and other dogs, and be cared for and not alone? That had been Annie's logic, quickly embraced and now considered visionary. And they saw the nightclub—often used during the day for something called ecstatic dancing, a great workout, Annie said—and they saw the large outdoor amphitheater, and the small indoor theater—"there are about ten comedy improv groups here"—and after they saw all that, there was lunch in the larger, first-floor cafeteria where, in the corner, on a small stage, there was a man, playing a guitar, who looked like an aging singer-songwriter Mae's parents listened to.

"Is that …?"

"It is," Annie said, not breaking her stride, "There's someone every day. Musicians, comedians, writers. That's Bailey's passion project, to bring them here to get some exposure, especially given how rough it is out there for them."

"I knew they came sometimes, but you're saying it's every day?"

"We book them a year ahead. We have to fight them off."

The singer-songwriter was singing passionately, his head tilted, hair covering his eyes, his fingers strumming feverishly, but the vast majority of the cafeteria was paying little to no attention.

"I can't imagine the budget for that," Mae said.

"Oh god, we don't *pay* them. Oh wait, you should meet this guy."

Annie stopped a man named Vipul, who, Annie said, would soon be reinventing all of television, a medium stuck more than any other in the twentieth century.

"Try nineteenth," he said, with a slight Indian accent, his English precise and lofty. "It's the last place where customers do not, ever, get what they want. The last vestige of feudal arrangements between maker and viewer. We are vassals no longer!" he said, and soon excused himself.

"That guy is on another level," Annie said as they made their way through the cafeteria. They stopped at five or six other tables, meeting fascinating people, every one of them working on something Annie deemed *world-rocking* or *life-changing* or *fifty years ahead of anyone else*. The range of the work being done was startling. They met a pair of women working on a submersible exploration craft that would make the Marianas Trench mysterious no more. "They'll map it like Manhattan," Annie said, and the two women did not argue the hyperbole. They stopped at a table where a trio of young men were looking at a screen, embedded into the table, displaying 3-D drawings of a new kind of low-cost housing, to be easily adopted throughout the developing world.

Annie grabbed Mae's hand and pulled her toward the exit. "Now we're seeing the Ochre Library. You heard of it?"

Mae hadn't, but didn't want to commit to that answer.

Annie gave her a conspiratorial look. "You're not supposed to see it, but I say we go."

They got into an elevator of plexiglass and neon and rose through the atrium, every floor

and office visible as they climbed five floors. “I can’t see how stuff like that works into the bottom line here,” Mae said.

“Oh god, I don’t know, either. But it’s not just about money here, as I’m guessing you know. There’s enough revenue to support the passions of the community. Those guys working on the sustainable housing, they were programmers, but a couple of them had studied architecture. So they write up a proposal, and the Wise Men went nuts for it. Especially Bailey. He just loves enabling the curiosity of great young minds. And his library’s insane. This is the floor.”

They stepped out of the elevator and into a long hallway, this one appointed in deep cherry and walnut, a series of compact chandeliers emitting a calm amber light.

“Old school,” Mae noted.

“You know about Bailey, right? He loves this ancient shit. Mahogany, brass, stained glass. That’s his aesthetic. He gets overruled in the rest of the buildings, but here he has his way. Check this out.”

Annie stopped at a large painting, a portrait of the Three Wise Men. “Hideous, right?” she said.

The painting was awkward, the kind of thing a high school artist might produce. In it, the three men, the founders of the company, were arranged in a pyramid, each of them dressed in their best-known clothes, wearing expressions that spoke, cartoonishly, of their personalities. Ty Gospodinov, the Circle’s boy-wonder visionary, was wearing nondescript glasses and an enormous hoodie, staring leftward and smiling; he seemed to be enjoying some moment, alone, tuned into some distant frequency. People said he was borderline Asperger’s, and the picture seemed intent on underscoring the point. With his dark unkempt hair, his unlined face, he looked no more than twenty-five.

“Ty looks checked out, right?” Annie said. “But he couldn’t be. None of us would be here if he wasn’t a fucking brilliant management master, too. I should explain the dynamic. You’ll be moving up quickly so I’ll lay it out.”

Ty, born Tyler Alexander Gospodinov, was the first Wise Man, Annie explained, and everyone always just called him Ty.

“I know this,” Mae said.

“Don’t stop me now. I’m giving you the same spiel I have to give to heads of state.”

“Okay.”

Annie continued.

Ty realized he was, at best, socially awkward, and at worst an utter interpersonal disaster. So, just six months before the company’s IPO, he made a very wise and profitable decision: he hired the other two Wise Men, Eamon Bailey and Tom Stenton. The move assuaged the fears of all investors and ultimately tripled the company’s valuation. The IPO raised $3 billion, unprecedented but not unexpected, and with all monetary concerns behind him, and with Stenton and Bailey aboard, Ty was free to float, to hide, to disappear. With every successive month, he was seen less and less around campus and in the media. He became more reclusive, and the aura around him, intentionally or not, only grew. Watchers of the Circle wondered, *Where is Ty and what is he planning?* These plans were kept unknown until they were revealed, and with each successive innovation brought forth by the Circle, it became less clear which had originated from Ty himself and which were the products of the increasingly vast group of inventors, the best in the world, who were now in the company fold.

Most observers assumed he was still involved, and some insisted that his fingerprints, his

knack for solutions global and elegant and infinitely scalable, were on every major Circle innovation. He had founded the company after a year in college, with no particular business acumen or measurable goals. “We used to call him Niagara,” his roommate said in one of the first articles about him. “The ideas just come like that, a million flowing out of his head, every second of every day, never-ending and overwhelming.”

Ty had devised the initial system, the Unified Operating System, which combined everything online that had heretofore been separate and sloppy—users’ social media profiles, their payment systems, their various passwords, their email accounts, user names, preferences, every last tool and manifestation of their interests. The old way—a new transaction, a new system, for every site, for every purchase—it was like getting into a different car to run any one kind of errand. “You shouldn’t have to have eighty-seven different cars,” he’d said, later, after his system had overtaken the web and the world.

Instead, he put all of it, all of every user’s needs and tools, into one pot and invented TruYou—one account, one identity, one password, one payment system, per person. There were no more passwords, no multiple identities. Your devices knew who you were, and your one identity—the *TruYou*, unbendable and unmaskable—was the person paying, signing up, responding, viewing and reviewing, seeing and being seen. You had to use your real name, and this was tied to your credit cards, your bank, and thus paying for anything was simple. One button for the rest of your life online.

To use any of the Circle’s tools, and they were the best tools, the most dominant and ubiquitous and free, you had to do so as yourself, as your actual self, as your TruYou. The era of false identities, identity theft, multiple user names, complicated passwords and payment systems was over. Anytime you wanted to see anything, use anything, comment on anything or buy anything, it was one button, one account, everything tied together and trackable and simple, all of it operable via mobile or laptop, tablet or retinal. Once you had a single account, it carried you through every corner of the web, every portal, every pay site, everything you wanted to do.

TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year. Though some sites were resistant at first, and free-internet advocates shouted about the right to be anonymous online, the TruYou wave was tidal and crushed all meaningful opposition. It started with the commerce sites. Why would any non-porn site want anonymous users when they could know exactly who had come through the door? Overnight, all comment boards became civil, all posters held accountable. The trolls, who had more or less overtaken the internet, were driven back into the darkness.

And those who wanted or needed to track the movements of consumers online had found their Valhalla: the actual buying habits of actual people were now eminently mappable and measurable, and the marketing to those actual people could be done with surgical precision. Most TruYou users, most internet users who simply wanted simplicity, efficiency, a clean and streamlined experience, were thrilled with the results. No longer did they have to memorize twelve identities and passwords; no longer did they have to tolerate the madness and rage of the anonymous hordes; no longer did they have to put up with buckshot marketing that guessed, at best, within a mile of their desires. Now the messages they did get were focused and accurate and, most of the time, even welcome.

And Ty had come upon all this more or less by accident. He was tired of remembering identities, entering passwords and his credit-card information, so he designed code to simplify it all. Did he purposely use the letters of his name in TruYou? He said he realized only afterward the connection. Did he have any idea of the commercial implications of TruYou? He claimed he did not, and most people assumed this was the case, that the monetization of Ty’s innovations

came from the other two Wise Men, those with the experience and business acumen to make it happen. It was they who monetized TruYou, who found ways to reap funds from all of Ty's innovations, and it was they who grew the company into the force that subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google, and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan.

"Tom doesn't look so good here," Annie noted. "He's not quite that sharky. But I hear he loves this picture."

To the lower left of Ty was Tom Stenton, the world-striding CEO and self-described *Capitalist Prime*—he loved the Transformers—wearing an Italian suit and grinning like the wolf that ate Little Red Riding Hood's grandmother. His hair was dark, at the temples striped in grey, his eyes flat, unreadable. He was more in the mold of the eighties Wall Street traders, unabashed about being wealthy, about being single and aggressive and possibly dangerous. He was a free-spending global titan in his early fifties who seemed stronger every year, who threw his money and influence around without fear. He was unafraid of presidents. He was not daunted by lawsuits from the European Union or threats from state-sponsored Chinese hackers. Nothing was worrisome, nothing was unattainable, nothing was beyond his pay grade. He owned a NASCAR team, a racing yacht or two, piloted his own plane. He was the anachronism at the Circle, the flashy CEO, and created conflicted feelings among many of the utopian young Circlers.

His kind of conspicuous consumption was notably absent from the lives of the other two Wise Men. Ty rented a ramshackle two-bedroom apartment a few miles away, but then again, no one had ever seen him arrive at or leave campus; the assumption was that he lived there. And everyone knew where Eamon Bailey lived—a highly visible, profoundly modest three-bedroom home on a widely accessible street ten minutes from campus. But Stenton had houses everywhere—New York, Dubai, Jackson Hole. A floor atop the Millennium Tower in San Francisco. An island near Martinique.

Eamon Bailey, standing next to him in the painting, seemed utterly at peace, joyful even, in the presence of these men, both of whom were, at least superficially, diametrically opposed to his values. His portrait, to the lower right of Ty's, showed him as he was—grey-haired, ruddy-faced, twinkly-eyed, happy and earnest. He was the public face of the company, the personality everyone associated with the Circle. When he smiled, which was near-constantly, his mouth smiled, his eyes smiled, his shoulders even seemed to smile. He was wry. He was funny. He had a way of speaking that was both lyrical and grounded, giving his audiences wonderful turns of phrase one moment and plainspoken common sense the next. He had come from Omaha, from an exceedingly normal family of six, and had more or less nothing remarkable in his past. He'd gone to Notre Dame and married his girlfriend, who'd gone to Saint Mary's down the road, and now they had four children of their own, three girls and finally a boy, though that boy had been born with cerebral palsy. "He's been touched," Bailey had put it, announcing the birth to the company and the world. "So we'll love him even more."

Of the Three Wise Men, Bailey was the most likely to be seen on campus, to play Dixieland trombone in the company talent show, most likely to appear on talk shows representing the Circle, chuckling when talking about—when shrugging off—this or that FCC investigation, or when unveiling a helpful new feature or game-changing technology. He preferred to be called Uncle Eamon, and when he strode through campus, he did so as would a beloved uncle, accessible and genuine. "Like Bill Murray striding through Pebble Beach," was how Stenton once described him. "Loved by all, and I think he really loves them back." The three of them, in life and in this portrait, made for a strange bouquet of mismatched flowers, but there was no doubt that it worked. Everyone knew it worked, the three-headed model of

management, and the dynamic was thereafter emulated elsewhere in the Fortune 500, with mixed results.

"But so why," Mae asked, "couldn't they afford a real portrait by someone who knows what they're doing?"

The more she looked at it, the stranger it became. The artist had arranged it such that each of the Wise Men had placed a hand on another's shoulder. It made no sense and defied the way arms could bend or stretch.

"Bailey thinks it's hilarious," Annie said. "He wanted it in the main hallway, but Stenton vetoed him. You know Bailey's a collector and all that, right? He's got incredible taste. I mean, he comes across as the good-time guy, as the everyman from Omaha, but he's a connoisseur, too, and is pretty obsessed with preserving the past—even the bad art of the past. Wait till you see his library."

They arrived at an enormous door, which seemed and likely was medieval, something that would have kept barbarians at bay. A pair of giant gargoyle knockers protruded at chest level, and Mae went for the easy gag.

"Nice knockers."

Annie snorted, waved her hand over a blue pad on the wall, and the door opened.

Annie turned to her. "Holy fuck, right?"

It was a three-story library, three levels built around an open atrium, everything fashioned in wood and copper and silver, a symphony of muted color. There were easily ten thousand books, most of them bound in leather, arranged tidily on shelves gleaming with lacquer. Between the books stood stern busts of notable humans, Greeks and Romans, Jefferson and Joan of Arc and MLK. A model of the *Spruce Goose*—or was it the *Enola Gay?*—hung from the ceiling. There were a dozen or so antique globes lit from within, the light buttery and soft, warming various lost nations.

"He bought so much of this stuff when it was about to be auctioned off, or lost. That's his crusade, you know. He goes to these distressed estates, these people who are about to have to sell their treasures at some terrible loss, and he pays market rates for all this, gives the original owners unlimited access to the stuff he's bought. That's who's here a lot, these grey-hairs who come in to read or touch their stuff. Oh you have to see *this*. It'll blow your head off."

Annie led Mae up the three flights of stairs, all of them tiled with intricate mosaics—reproductions, Mae assumed, of something from the Byzantine era. She held the brass rail going up, noting the lack of fingerprints, of any blemish whatsoever. She saw accountants' green reading lamps, telescopes crisscrossed and gleaming in copper and gold, pointing out the many beveled-glass windows—"Oh look up," Annie told her, and she did, to find the ceiling was stained glass, a fevered rendering of countless angels arranged in rings. "That's from some church in Rome."

They arrived at the library's top floor, and Annie led Mae through narrow corridors of round-spined books, some of them as tall as her—Bibles and atlases, illustrated histories of wars and upheavals, long-gone nations and peoples.

"All right. Check this out," Annie said. "Wait. Before I show you this, you have to give me a verbal non-disclosure agreement, okay?"

"Fine."

"Seriously."

"I'm serious. I take this seriously."

"Good. Now when I move this book …" Annie said, removing a large volume titled *The*

Best Years of Our Lives. “Watch this,” she said, and backed up. Slowly, the wall, bearing a hundred books, began to move inward, revealing a secret chamber within. “That’s High Nerd, right?” Annie said, and they walked through. Inside, the room was round and lined with books, but the main focus was a hole in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a copper barrier; a pole extended down, through the floor and to unknown regions below.

“Does he fight fires?” Mae asked.

“Hell if I know,” Annie said.

“Where does it go?”

“As far as I can tell, it goes to Bailey’s parking space.”

Mae mustered no adjectives. “You ever go down?”

“Nah, even showing me this was a risk. He shouldn’t have. He told me that. And now I’m showing you, which is silly. But it shows you the kind of mind this guy has. He can have anything, and what he wants is a fireman’s pole that drops seven stories to the garage.”

The sound of a droplet emitted from Annie’s earpiece, and she said “Okay” to whomever was on the other end. It was time to go.

“So,” Annie said in the elevator—they were dropping back to the main staff floors—“I have to go and do some work. It’s plankton-inspection time.”

“It’s what time?” Mae asked.

“You know, little startups hoping the big whale—that’s us—will find them tasty enough to eat. Once a week we take a series of meetings with these guys, Ty-wannabes, and they try to convince us that we need to acquire them. It’s a little bit sad, given they don’t even pretend to have any revenue, or even potential for it, anymore. Listen, though, I’m going to hand you off to two company ambassadors. They’re both very serious about their jobs. Actually, beware of just *how* into their jobs they are. They’ll give you a tour of the rest of the campus, and I’ll pick you up for the solstice party afterward, okay? Starts at seven.”

The doors opened on the second floor, near the Glass Eatery, and Annie introduced her to Denise and Josiah, both in their late-middle-twenties, both with the same level-eyed sincerity, both wearing simple button-down shirts in tasteful colors. Each shook Mae’s hand in two of theirs, and almost seemed to bow.

“Make sure she doesn’t work today,” were Annie’s last words before she disappeared back into the elevator.

Josiah, a thin and heavily freckled man, turned his blue unblinking eyes to Mae. “We’re so glad to meet you.”

Denise, tall, slim, Asian-American, smiled at Mae and closed her eyes, as if savoring the moment. “Annie told us all about you two, how far back you go. Annie’s the heart and soul of this place, so we’re very lucky to have you here.”

“Everyone loves Annie,” Josiah added.

Their deference to Mae felt awkward. They were surely older than her, but they behaved as if she were a visiting eminence.

“So I know some of this might be redundant,” Josiah said, “but if it’s okay we’d like to give you the full newcomer tour. Would that be okay? We promise not to make it lame.”

Mae laughed, urged them on, and followed.

The rest of the day was a blur of glass rooms and brief, impossibly warm introductions. Everyone she met was busy, just short of overworked, but nevertheless thrilled to meet her, so happy she was there, any friend of Annie’s … There was a tour of the health center, and an introduction to the dreadlocked Dr. Hampton who ran it. There was a tour of the emergency

clinic and the Scottish nurse who did the admitting. A tour of the organic gardens, a hundred yards square, where there were two full-time farmers giving a talk to a large group of Circlers while they sampled the latest harvest of carrots and tomatoes and kale. There was a tour of the mini-golf area, the movie theater, the bowling alleys, the grocery store. Finally, deep in what Mae assumed was the corner of the campus—she could see the fence beyond, the rooftops of San Vincenzo hotels where visitors to the Circle stayed—they toured the company dorms. Mae had heard something about them, Annie mentioning that sometimes she crashed on campus and now preferred those rooms to her own home. Walking through the hallways, seeing the tidy rooms, each with a shiny kitchenette, a desk, an overstuffed couch and bed, Mae had to agree that the appeal was visceral.

"There are 180 rooms now, but we're growing quickly," Josiah said. "With ten thousand or so people on campus, there's always a percentage of people who work late, or just need a nap during the day. These rooms are always free, always clean—you just have to check online to see which ones are available. Right now they book up fast, but the plan is to have at least a few thousand rooms within the next few years."

"And after a party like tonight's, these are always full," Denise said, with what she meant to be a conspiratorial wink.

The tour continued through the afternoon, with stops to sample food at the culinary class, taught that day by a celebrated young chef known for using the whole of any animal. She presented Mae with a dish called roasted pigface, which Mae ate and discovered tasted like a more fatty bacon; she liked it very much. They passed other visitors as they toured the campus, groups of college students, and packs of vendors, and what appeared to be a senator and his handlers. They passed an arcade stocked with vintage pinball machines and an indoor badminton court, where, Annie said, a former world champion was kept on retainer. By the time Josiah and Denise had brought her back around to the center of the campus, the light was dimming, and staffers were installing tiki torches in the grass and lighting them. A few thousand Circlers began to gather in the twilight, and standing among them, Mae knew that she never wanted to work—never wanted to be—anywhere else. Her hometown, and the rest of California, the rest of America, seemed like some chaotic mess in the developing world. Outside the walls of the Circle, all was noise and struggle, failure and filth. But here, all had been perfected. The best people had made the best systems and the best systems had reaped funds, unlimited funds, that made possible this, the best place to work. And it was natural that it was so, Mae thought. Who else but utopians could make utopia?

"This party? This is nothing," Annie assured Mae, as they shuffled down the forty-foot buffet. It was dark now, the night air cooling, but the campus was inexplicably warm, and illuminated by hundreds of torches bursting with amber light. "This one's Bailey's idea. Not like he's some Earth Mother, but he gets into the stars, the seasons, so the solstice stuff is his. He'll appear at some point and welcome everyone—usually he does at least. Last year he was in some kind of tanktop. He's very proud of his arms."

Mae and Annie were on the lush lawn, loading their plates and then finding seats in the stone amphitheater built into a high grassy berm. Annie was refilling Mae's glass from a bottle of Riesling that, she said, was made on campus, some kind of new concoction that had fewer calories and more alcohol. Mae looked across the lawn, at the hissing torches arrayed in rows, each row leading revelers to various activities—limbo, kickball, the Electric Slide—none of them related in any way to the solstice. The seeming randomness, the lack of any enforced schedule, made for a party that set low expectations and far exceeded them. Everyone was

quickly blitzed, and soon Mae lost Annie, and then got lost entirely, eventually finding her way to the bocce courts, which were being used by a small group of older Circlers, all of them at least thirty, to roll cantaloupes into bowling pins. She made her way back to the lawn, where she joined a game the Circlers were calling "Ha," which seemed to involve nothing more than lying down, with legs or arms or both overlapping. Whenever the person next to you said "Ha" you had to say it, too. It was a terrible game, but for the time being, Mae needed it, because her head was spinning, and she felt better horizontal.

"Look at this one. She looks so peaceful." It was a voice close by. Mae realized the voice, a man's, was referring to her, and she opened her eyes. She saw no one above her. Only sky, which was mostly clear, with wisps of grey clouds moving swiftly across the campus and heading out to sea. Mae's eyes felt heavy, and she knew it was not late, not past ten anyway, and she didn't want to do what she often did, which was fall asleep after two or three drinks, so she got up and went looking for Annie or more Riesling or both. She found the buffet, and found it in shambles, a feast raided by animals or Vikings, and made her way to the nearest bar, which was out of Riesling and was now offering only some kind of vodka-and-energy drink concoction. She moved on, asking random passersby about Riesling, until she felt a shadow pass before her.

"There's more over here," the shadow said.

Mae turned to find a pair of glasses reflecting blue, sitting atop the vague shape of a man. He turned to walk away.

"Am I following you?" Mae asked.

"Not yet. You're standing still. But you should if you want more of that wine."

She followed the shadow across the lawn and under a canopy of high trees, the moonlight shooting through, a hundred silver spears. Now Mae could see the shadow better—he was wearing a sand-colored T-shirt and some kind of vest, leather or suede, over it—a combination Mae hadn't seen in some time. Then he stopped and was crouching down near the bottom of a waterfall, a manmade waterfall coming down the side of the Industrial Revolution.

"I hid a few bottles here," he said, his hands deep in the pool that received the falling water. Not finding anything, he kneeled down, his arms submerged to the shoulder, until he retrieved two sleek green bottles, stood up and turned to her. Finally she got a good look at him. His face was a soft triangle, concluding in a chin so subtly dimpled she hadn't seen it before that moment. He had the skin of a child, the eyes of a much older man and a prominent nose, crooked and bent but somehow giving stability to the rest of his face, like the keel of a yacht. His eyebrows were heavy dashes rushing away, toward his ears, which were rounded, large, princess-pink. "You want to go back to the game or …?" He seemed to be implying that the "or" could be far better.

"Sure," she said, realizing that she didn't know this person, knew nothing about him. But because he had those bottles, and because she'd lost Annie, and because she trusted everyone within these Circle walls—she had at that moment so much love for everyone within those walls, where everything was new and everything allowed—she followed him back to the party, to the outskirts of it anyway, where they sat on a high ring of steps overlooking the lawn, and watched the silhouettes run and squeal and fall below.

He opened both bottles, gave one to Mae, took a sip from his, and said his name was Francis.

"Not Frank?" she asked. She took the bottle and filled her mouth with the candysweet wine.

"People try to call me that and I … I ask them not to."

She laughed, and he laughed.

He was a developer, he said, and had been at the company for almost two years. Before that he'd been a kind of anarchist, a provocateur. He'd gotten the job here by hacking further into the Circle system than anyone else. Now he was on the security team.

"This is my first day," Mae noted.

"No way."

And then Mae, who intended to say "I shit you not," instead decided to innovate, but something got garbled during her verbal innovation, and she uttered the words "I fuck you not," knowing almost instantly that she would remember these words, and hate herself for them, for decades to come.

"You fuck me not?" he asked, deadpan. "That sounds very conclusive. You've made a decision with very little information. You fuck me not. Wow."

Mae tried to explain what she meant to say, how she thought, or some department of her brain thought, that she would turn the phrase around a bit … But it didn't matter. He was laughing now, and he knew she had a sense of humor, and she knew he did, too, and somehow he made her feel safe, made her trust that he would never bring it up again, that this terrible thing she said would remain between them, that they both understood mistakes are made by all and that they should, if everyone is acknowledging our common humanity, our common frailty and propensity for sounding and looking ridiculous a thousand times a day, that these mistakes should be allowed to be forgotten.

"First day," he said. "Well congratulations. A toast."

They clinked bottles and took sips. Mae held her bottle up to the moon to see how much was left; the liquid turned an otherworldly blue and she saw that she'd already swallowed half. She put the bottle down.

"I like your voice," he said. "Was it always that way?"

"Low and scratchy?"

"I would call it *seasoned*. I would call it *soulful*. You know Tatum O'Neal?"

"My parents made me watch *Paper Moon* a hundred times. They wanted me to feel better."

"I love that movie," he said.

"They thought I'd grow up like Addie Pray, streetwise but adorable. They wanted a tomboy. They cut my hair like hers."

"I like it."

"You like bowl cuts."

"No. Your voice. So far it's the best thing about you."

Mae said nothing. She felt like she'd been slapped.

"Shit," he said. "Did that sound weird? I was trying to give you a compliment."

There was a troubling pause; Mae had had a few terrible experiences with men who spoke too well, who leaped over any number of steps to land on inappropriate compliments. She turned to him, to confirm he was not what she thought he was—generous, harmless—but actually warped, troubled, asymmetrical. But when she looked at him, she saw the same smooth face, blue glasses, ancient eyes. His expression was pained.

He looked at his bottle, as if to lay the blame there. "I just wanted to make you feel better about your voice. But I guess I insulted the rest of you."

Mae thought on that for a second, but her brain, addled with Riesling, was slow-moving, sticky. She gave up trying to parse his statement or his intentions. "I think you're strange," she

said.

"I don't have parents," he said. "Does that buy me some forgiveness?" Then, realizing he was revealing too much, and too desperately, he said, "You're not drinking."

Mae decided to let him drop the subject of his childhood. "I'm already done," she said. "I've gotten the full effect."

"I'm really sorry. I sometimes get my words in the wrong order. I'm happiest when I don't talk at something like this."

"You are really strange," Mae said again, and meant it. She was twenty-four, and he was unlike anyone she'd ever known. That was, she thought drunkenly, evidence of God, was it not? That she could encounter thousands of people in her life thus far, so many of them similar, so many of them forgettable, but then there is this person, new and bizarre and speaking bizarrely. Every day some scientist discovered a new species of frog or waterlily, and that, too, seemed to confirm some divine showman, some celestial inventor putting new toys before us, hidden but hidden poorly, just where we might happen upon them. And this Francis person, he was something entirely different, some new frog. Mae turned to look at him, thinking she might kiss him.

But he was busy. With one hand, he was emptying his shoe, sand pouring from it. With the other he seemed to be biting off most of his fingernail.

Her reverie ended, she thought of home and bed.

"How will everyone get back?" she asked.

Francis looked out at a scrum of people who seemed to be trying to form a pyramid. "There's the dorms, of course. But I bet those are full already. There are always a few shuttles ready, too. They probably told you that." He waved his bottle in the direction of the main entrance, where Mae could make out the rooftops of the minibuses she'd seen that morning on her way in. "The company does cost analyses on everything. And one staffer driving home too tired or, in this case, too drunk to drive—well, the cost of shuttles is a lot cheaper in the long run. Don't tell me you didn't come for the shuttle buses. The shuttle buses are awesome. Inside they're like yachts. Lots of compartments and wood."

"Lots of wood? Lots of wood?" Mae punched Francis in the arm, knowing she was flirting, knowing it was idiotic to flirt with a fellow Circler on her first night, that it was idiotic to drink this much on her first night. But she was doing all those things and was happy about it.

A figure was gliding toward them. Mae watched with dull curiosity, realizing first that the figure was female. And then that this figure was Annie.

"Is this man harassing you?" she asked.

Francis moved quickly away from Mae, and then hid his bottle behind his back. Annie laughed.

"Francis, what are you so squirrelly about?"

"Sorry. I thought you said something else."

"Whoa. Guilty conscience! I saw Mae here punch you in the arm and I made a joke. But are you trying to confess something? What have you been planning, Francis Garbanzo?"

"Garaventa."

"Yes. I know your name."

"Francis," Annie said, dropping herself clumsily between them, "I need to ask you something, as your esteemed colleague but also as your friend. Can I do that?"

"Sure."

"Good. Can I have some alone time with Mae? I need to kiss her on the mouth."

Francis laughed, then stopped, noticing that neither Mae nor Annie was laughing. Scared and confused, and visibly intimidated by Annie, he was soon walking down the steps, and across the lawn, dodging revelers. Halfway across the green he stopped, turned back and looked up, as if making sure Annie intended to replace him as Mae's companion that night. His fears confirmed, he walked under the awning of the Dark Ages. He tried to open the door, but couldn't. He pulled and pushed, but it would not budge. Knowing they were watching, he made his way around the corner and out of view.

"He's in security, he says," Mae said.

"That's what he told you? Francis Garaventa?"

"I guess he shouldn't have."

"Well, it's not like he's in se*cur*ity-security. He's not Mossad. But did I interrupt something you definitely shouldn't be doing on your first night here you idiot?"

"You didn't interrupt anything."

"I think I *did*."

"No. Not really."

"I did. I know this."

Annie located the bottle at Mae's feet. "I thought we ran out of everything hours ago."

"There was some wine in the waterfall—by the Industrial Revolution."

"Oh, right. People hide things there."

"I just heard myself say, 'There was some wine in the waterfall by the Industrial Revolution.' "

Annie looked across the campus. "I know. Shit. I know."

At home, after the shuttle, after a jello shot someone gave her onboard, after listening to the shuttle driver talk wistfully about his family, his twins, his wife, who had gout, Mae couldn't sleep. She lay on her cheap futon, in her tiny room, in the railroad apartment she shared with two near-strangers, both of them flight attendants and rarely seen. Her apartment was on the second floor of a former motel and it was humble, uncleanable, smelling of the desperation and bad cooking of its former residents. It was a sad place, especially after a day at the Circle, where all was made with care and love and the gift of a good eye. In her wretched low bed, Mae slept for a few hours, woke up, recounted the day and the night, thought of Annie and Francis, and Denise and Josiah, and the fireman's pole, and the *Enola Gay*, and the waterfall, and the tiki torches, all of these things the stuff of vacations and dreams and impossible to maintain, but then she knew—and this is what was keeping her up, her head careening with something like a toddler's joy—that she would be going back to that place, the place where all these things happened. She was welcome there, employed there.

She got to work early. When she arrived, though, at eight, she realized she hadn't been given a desk, at least not a real desk, and so she had nowhere to go. She waited an hour, under a sign that said LET'S DO THIS. LET'S DO ALL OF THIS, until Renata arrived and brought her to the second floor of the Renaissance, into a large room, the size of a basketball court, where there were about twenty desks, all different, all shaped from blond wood into desktops of organic shapes. They were separated by dividers of glass, and arranged in groups of five, like petals on a flower. None were occupied.

"You're the first here," Renata said, "but you won't be alone for long. Each new Customer Experience area tends to fill pretty quickly. And you're not far from all the more senior people." And here she swept her arm around, indicating about a dozen offices surrounding the open space. The occupants of each were visible through the glass walls, each of the

supervisors somewhere between twenty-six and thirty-two, starting their day, seeming relaxed, competent, wise.

"The designers really like glass, eh?" Mae said, smiling.

Renata stopped, furrowed her brow and thought on this notion. She put a strand of hair behind her ear and said, "I think so. I can check. But first we should explain the setup, and what to expect on your first real day."

Renata explained the features of the desk and chair and screen, all of which had been ergonomically perfected, and could be adjusted for those who wanted to work standing up.

"You can set your stuff down and adjust your chair, and—Oh, looks like you have a welcoming committee. Don't get up," she said, and made way.

Mae followed Renata's eyeline and saw a trio of young faces making their way to her. A balding man in his late twenties extended his hand. Mae shook it, and he put an oversized tablet on the desk in front of her.

"Hi Mae, I'm Rob from payroll. Bet you're glad to see me." He smiled then laughed heartily, as if he'd just realized anew the humor in his repartee. "Okay," he said, "we've filled out everything here. There's just these three places you need to sign." He pointed to the screen, where yellow rectangles flashed, asking for her signature.

When she was finished, Rob took the tablet and smiled with great warmth. "Thank you, and welcome aboard."

He turned and left, and was replaced by a full-figured woman with flawless, copper skin.

"Hi Mae, I'm Tasha, the notary." She held out a wide book. "You have your driver's license?" Mae gave it to her. "Great. I need three signatures from you. Don't ask me why. And don't ask me why this is on paper. Government rules." Tasha pointed to three consecutive boxes, and Mae signed her name in each.

"Thank you," Tasha said, and now held out a blue inkpad. "Now your fingerprint next to each. Don't worry, this ink won't stain. You'll see."

Mae pushed her thumb into the pad, and then into the boxes next to each of her three signatures. The ink was visible on the page, but when Mae looked at her thumb, it was absolutely clean.

Tasha's eyebrows arched, registering Mae's delight. "See? It's invisible. The only place it shows up is in this book."

This was the sort of thing Mae had come for. Everything was done better here. Even the *fingerprint ink* was advanced, invisible.

When Tasha left she was replaced by a thin man in a red zippered shirt. He shook Mae's hand.

"Hi, I'm Jon. I emailed you yesterday about bringing your birth certificate?" His hands came together, as if in prayer.

Mae retrieved the certificate from her bag and Jon's eyes lit up. "You brought it!" He clapped quickly, silently, and revealed a mouth of tiny teeth. "No *one* remembers the first time. You're my new favorite." He took the certificate, promising to return it after he'd made a copy.

Behind him was a fourth staff member, this one a beatific-looking man of about thirty-five, by far the oldest person Mae had met that day.

"Hi Mae. I'm Brandon, and I have the honor of giving you your new tablet." He was holding a gleaming object, translucent, its edges black and smooth as obsidian.

Mae was stunned. "These haven't been *released* yet."

Brandon smiled broadly. "It's four times as fast as its predecessor. I've been playing with

mine all week. It's very cool."

"And I get one?"

"You already did," he said. "It's got your name on it."

He turned the tablet on its side to reveal that it had been inscribed with Mae's full name: MAEBELLINE RENNER HOLLAND.

He handed it to her. It was the weight of a paper plate.

"Now, I'm assuming you have your own tablet?"

"I do. Well, a laptop anyway."

"Laptop. Wow. Can I see it?"

Mae pointed to it. "Now I feel like I should chuck it in the trash."

Brandon paled. "No, don't do that! At least recycle it."

"Oh no. I was just kidding," Mae said. "I'll probably hold onto it. I have all my stuff on it."

"Good segue, Mae! That's what I'm here to do next. We should transfer all your stuff to the new tablet."

"Oh. I can do that."

"Would you grant me the honor? I've trained all my life for this very moment."

Mae laughed and pushed her chair out of the way. Brandon knelt next to her desk and put the new tablet next to her laptop. In minutes he had transferred all her information and accounts.

"Okay. Now let's do the same with your phone. Ta-da." He reached into his bag and unveiled a new phone, a few significant steps ahead of her own. Like the tablet, it had her name already engraved on the back. He set both phones, new and old, on the desk next to each other and quickly, wirelessly, transferred everything within from one to the other.

"Okay. Now everything you had on your other phone and on your hard drive is accessible here on the tablet and your new phone, but it's also backed up in the cloud and on our servers. Your music, your photos, your messages, your data. It can never be lost. You lose this tablet or phone, it takes exactly six minutes to retrieve all your stuff and dump it on the next one. It'll be here next year and next century."

They both looked at the new devices.

"I wish our system existed ten years ago," he said. "I fried two different hard drives back then, and it's like having your house burn down with all your belongings inside."

Brandon stood up.

"Thank you," Mae said.

"No sweat," he said. "And this way we can send you updates for the software, the apps, everything, and know you're current. Everyone in CE has to be on the same version of any given software, as you can imagine. I think that's it …" he said, backing away. Then he stopped. "Oh, and it's crucial that all company devices are password protected, so I gave you one. It's written here." He handed her a slip of paper bearing a series of digits and numerals and obscure typographical symbols. "I hope you can memorize it today and then throw this away. Deal?"

"Yes. Deal."

"We can change the password later if you want. Just let me know and I'll give you a new one. They're all computer-generated."

Mae took her old laptop and moved it toward her bag.

Brandon looked at it like it was an invasive species. "You want me to get rid of it? We do it in a very environmentally friendly way."

"Maybe tomorrow," she said, "I want to say goodbye."

Brandon smiled indulgently. “Oh. I get it. Okay then.” He gave a bow and left, and behind him she saw Annie. She was holding her knuckle up to her chin, tilting her head.

“There’s my little girl, grown up at last!”

Mae got up and wrapped her arms around her.

“Thank you,” she said into Annie’s neck.

“Awww.” Annie tried to pull away.

Mae grabbed her tighter. “Really.”

“It’s okay.” Annie finally extricated herself. “Easy there. Or maybe keep going. It was starting to get sexy.”

“Really. Thank you,” Mae said, her voice quaking.

“No, no, no,” Annie said. “No crying on your second day.”

“I’m sorry. I’m just so grateful.”

“Stop.” Annie moved in and held her again. “Stop. Stop. Jesus. You are such a freak.”

Mae breathed deeply, until she was calm again. “I think I have it under control now. Oh, my dad says he loves you, too. Everyone’s so happy.”

“Okay. That’s a little strange, given I’ve never met him. But tell him I love him too. Passionately. Is he hot? A silver fox? A swinger? Maybe we can work something out. Now can we get to work around here?”

“Yup, yup,” Mae said, sitting down again. “Sorry.”

Annie arched her eyebrows mischievously. “I feel like school’s about to start and we just found out we got put in the same homeroom. They give you a new tablet?”

“Just now.”

“Let me see.” Annie inspected it. “Ooh, the engraving is a nice touch. We’re going to get in such trouble together, aren’t we?”

“I hope so.”

“Okay, here comes your team leader. Hi Dan.”

Mae rushed to wipe any moisture from her face. She looked past Annie to see a handsome man, compact and tidy, approaching. He wore a brown hoodie and a smile of great contentment.

“Hi Annie, how are you?” he said, shaking her hand.

“Good, Dan.”

“I’m so glad, Annie.”

“You got a good one here, I hope you know,” Annie said, grabbing Mae’s wrist and squeezing.

“Oh I *do* know,” he said.

“You watch out for her.”

“I will,” he said, and turned from Annie to Mae. His smile of contentment grew into something like absolute certainty.

“I’ll be watching *you* watch *her*,” Annie said.

“Glad to know it,” he said.

“See you at lunch,” Annie said to Mae, and was gone.

Everyone but Mae and Dan had left, but his smile hadn’t changed—it was the smile of a man who did not smile for show. It was the smile of a man who was exactly where he wanted to be. He pulled up a chair.

“So good to see you here,” he said. “I’m very glad you accepted our offer.”

Mae looked into his eyes for signs of disingenuousness, given there was no rational

person who would have declined an invitation to work here. But there was nothing like that. Dan had interviewed her three times for the job, and had seemed unshakably sincere each time.

"So I assume all the paperwork and fingerprints are done?"

"I think so."

"Like to take a walk?"

They left her desk and, after a hundred yards of glass hallway, walked through high double doors and into the open air. They climbed a wide stairway.

"We just finished the roofdeck," he said. "I think you'll like it."

When they reached the top of the stairs, the view was spectacular. The roof overlooked most of the campus, the surrounding city of San Vincenzo and the bay beyond. Mae and Dan took it all in, and then he turned to her.

"Mae, now that you're aboard, I wanted to get across some of the core beliefs here at the company. And chief among them is that just as important as the work we do here—and that work is very important—we want to make sure that you can be a human being here, too. We want this to be a workplace, sure, but it should also be a *human*place. And that means the fostering of community. In fact, it *must* be a community. That's one of our slogans, as you probably know: *Community First*. And you've seen the signs that say *Humans Work Here*—I insist on those. That's my pet issue. We're not automatons. This isn't a sweatshop. We're a group of the best minds of our generation. Genera*tions*. And making sure this is a place where our humanity is respected, where our opinions are dignified, where our voices are heard—this is as important as any revenue, any stock price, any endeavor undertaken here. Does that sound corny?"

"No, no," Mae rushed to say. "Definitely not. That's why I'm here. I love the 'community first' idea. Annie's been telling me about it since she started. At my last job, no one really communicated very well. It was basically the opposite of here in every way."

Dan turned to look into the hills to the east, covered in mohair and patches of green. "I hate hearing that kind of thing. With the technology available, communication should never be in doubt. Understanding should never be out of reach or anything but clear. It's what we do here. You might say it's the mission of the company—it's an obsession of mine, anyway. Communication. Understanding. Clarity."

Dan nodded emphatically, as if his mouth had just uttered, independently, something that his ears found quite profound.

"In the Renaissance, as you know, we're in charge of the customer experience, CE, and some people might think that's the least sexy part of this whole enterprise. But as I see it, and the Wise Men see it, it's the foundation of everything that happens here. If we don't give the customers a satisfying, human and *humane* experience, then we have no customers. It's pretty elemental. We're the proof that this company is human."

Mae didn't know what to say. She agreed completely. Her last boss, Kevin, couldn't talk like this. Kevin had no philosophy. Kevin had no ideas. Kevin had only his odors and his mustache. Mae was grinning like an idiot.

"I know you'll be great here," he said, and his arm extended toward her, as if he wanted to put his palm on her shoulder but thought against it. His hand fell to his side. "Let's go downstairs and you can get started."

They left the roofdeck and descended the wide stairs. They returned to her desk, where they saw a fuzzy-haired man.

"There he is," Dan said. "Early as always. Hi Jared."

Jared's face was serene, unlined, his hands resting patiently and unmoving in his ample

lap. He was wearing khaki pants and a button-down shirt a size too small.

"Jared will be doing your training, and he'll be your main contact here at CE. I oversee the team, and Jared oversees the unit. So we're the two main names you'll need to know. Jared, you ready to get Mae started?"

"I am," he said. "Hi Mae." He stood, extended his hand, and Mae shook it. It was rounded and soft, like a cherub's.

Dan said goodbye to both of them and left.

Jared grinned and ran a hand through his fuzzy hair. "So, training time. You feel ready?"

"Absolutely."

"You need coffee or tea or anything?"

Mae shook her head. "I'm all set."

"Good. Let's sit down."

Mae sat down, and Jared pulled his chair next to hers.

"Okay. As you know, for now you're just doing straight-up customer maintenance for the smaller advertisers. They send a message to Customer Experience, and it gets routed to one of us. Random at first, but once you start working with a customer, that customer will continue to be routed to you, for the sake of continuity. When you get the query, you figure out the answer, you write them back. That's the core of it. Simple enough in theory. So far so good?"

Mae nodded, and he went through the twenty most common requests and questions, and showed her a menu of boilerplate responses.

"Now, that doesn't mean you just paste the answer in and send it back. You should make each response personal, specific. You're a person, and they're a person, so you shouldn't be imitating a robot, and you shouldn't treat them like they're robots. Know what I mean? No robots work here. We never want the customer to think they're dealing with a faceless entity, so you should always be sure to inject humanity into the process. That sound good?"

Mae nodded. She liked that: *No robots work here*.

They went through a dozen or so practice scenarios, and Mae polished her answers a bit more each time. Jared was a patient trainer, and walked her through every customer eventuality. In the event that she was stumped, she could bounce the query to his own queue, and he'd take it. That's what he did most of the day, Jared said—take and answer the stumpers from the junior Customer Experience reps.

"But those will be pretty rare. You'd be surprised at how many of the questions you'll be able to field right away. Now let's say you've answered a client's question, and they seem satisfied. That's when you send them the survey, and they fill it out. It's a set of quick questions about your service, their overall experience, and at the end they're asked to rate it. They send the questions back, and then you immediately know how you did. The rating pops up here."

He pointed to the corner of her screen, where there was a large number, 99, and below, a grid of other numbers.

"The big 99 is the last customer's rating. The customer will rate you on a scale of, guess what, 1 to 100. That most recent rating will pop up here, and then that'll be averaged with the rest of the day's scores in this next box. That way you'll always know how you're doing, recently and generally. Now, I know what you're thinking, 'Okay, Jared, what kind of average is average?' And the answer is, if it dips below 95, then you might step back and see what you can do better. Maybe you bring the average up with the next customer, maybe you see how you might improve. Now, if it's consistently slumping, then you might have a meet-up with Dan or another team leader to go over some best practices. Sound good?"

"It does," Mae said. "I really appreciate this, Jared. In my previous job, I was in the dark about where I stood until, like, quarterly evaluations. It was nerve-wracking."

"Well, you'll love this then. If they fill out the survey and do the rating, and pretty much everyone does, then you send them the next message. This one thanks them for filling out the survey, and it encourages them to tell a friend about the experience they just had with you, using the Circle's social media tools. Ideally they at least zing it or give you a smile or a frown. In a best-case scenario, you might get them to zing about it or write about it on another customer-service site. We get people out there zinging about their great customer service experiences with you, then everyone wins. Got it?"

"Got it."

"Okay, let's do a live one. Ready?"

Mae wasn't, but couldn't say that. "Ready."

Jared brought up a customer request, and after reading it, let out a quick snort to indicate its elementary nature. He chose a boilerplate answer, adapted it a bit, told the customer to have a fantastic day. The exchange took about ninety seconds, and two minutes later, the screen confirmed the customer had answered the questionnaire, and a score appeared: 99. Jared sat back and turned to Mae.

"Now, that's good, right? Ninety-nine is good. But I can't help wondering why it wasn't a 100. Let's look." He opened up the customer's survey answers and scanned through. "Well, there's no clear sign that any part of their experience was unsatisfactory. Now, most companies would say, Wow, 99 out of 100 points, that's nearly perfect. And I say, exactly: it's *nearly* perfect, sure. But at the Circle, that missing point nags at us. So let's see if we can get to the bottom of it. Here's a follow-up that we send out."

He showed her another survey, this one shorter, asking the customer what about their interaction could have been improved and how. They sent it to the customer.

Seconds later, the response came back. "All was good. Sorry. Should have given you a 100. Thanks!!"

Jared tapped the screen and gave a thumbs-up to Mae.

"Okay. Sometimes you might just encounter someone who isn't really sensitive to the metrics. So it's good to ask them, to make sure you get that clarity. Now we're back to a perfect score. You ready to do your own?"

"I am."

They downloaded another customer query, and Mae scrolled through the boilerplates, found the appropriate answer, personalized it, and sent it back. When the survey came back, her rating was 100.

Jared seemed briefly taken aback. "First one you get 100, wow," he said. "I knew you'd be good." He had lost his footing, but now regained it. "Okay, I think you're ready to take on some more. Now, a couple more things. Let's turn on your second screen." He turned on a smaller screen to her right. "This one is for intra-office messaging. All Circlers send messages out through your main feed, but they appear on the second screen. This is to make clear the importance of the messages, and to help you delineate which is which. From time to time you'll see messages from me over here, just checking in or with some adjustment or news. Okay?"

"Got it."

"Now, remember to bounce any stumpers to me, and if you need to stop and talk, you can shoot me a message, or stop by. I'm just down the hall. I expect you to be in touch pretty frequently for the first few weeks, one way or the other. That's how I know you're learning. So

don't hesitate."

"I won't."

"Great. Now, are you ready to get *started*-started?"

"I am."

"Okay. That means I open the chute. And when I release this deluge on you, you'll have your own queue, and you'll be inundated for the next two hours, till lunch. You ready?"

Mae felt she was. "I am."

"Are you sure? Okay then."

He activated her account, gave her a mock-salute, and left. The chute opened, and in the first twelve minutes, she answered four requests, her score at 96. She was sweating heavily, but the rush was electric.

A message from Jared appeared on her second screen. *Great so far! Let's see if we can get that up to 97 soon*.

I will! she wrote.

And send follow-ups to the sub-100s.

Okay, she wrote.

She sent out seven follow-ups, and three customers adjusted their scores to 100. She answered another ten questions by 11:45. Now her aggregate was 98.

Another message appeared on her second screen, this one from Dan. *Fantastic work, Mae! How you feeling?*

Mae was astonished. A team leader who checked in with you, and so kindly, on the first day?

Fine. Thanks! she wrote back, and brought up the next customer request.

Another message from Jared appeared below the first.

Anything I can do? Questions I can answer?

No thanks! she wrote. *I'm all set for now. Thanks, Jared!* She returned to the first screen. Another message from Jared popped up on the second.

Remember that I can only help if you tell me how.

Thanks again! she wrote.

By lunch she had answered thirty-six requests and her score was at 97.

A message from Jared came through. *Well done! Let's follow up on any remaining sub-100s*.

Will do, she answered, and sent out the follow-ups to those she hadn't already handled. She brought a few 98s to 100 and then saw a message from Dan: *Great work, Mae!*

Seconds later, a second-screen message, this one from Annie, appeared below Dan's: *Dan says you're kicking ass. That's my girl!*

And then a message told her she'd been mentioned on Zing. She clicked over to read it. It was written by Annie. *Newbie Mae is kicking ass!* She'd sent it out to the rest of the Circle campus—10,041 people.

The zing was forwarded 322 times and there were 187 follow-up comments. They appeared on her second screen in an ever-lengthening thread. Mae didn't have time to read them all, but she scrolled quickly through, and the validation felt good. At the end of the day, Mae's score was 98. Congratulatory messages arrived from Jared and Dan and Annie. A series of zings followed, announcing and celebrating what Annie called *the highest score of any CE newb ever of all time suck it.*

By her first Friday Mae had served 436 customers and had memorized the boilerplates.

Nothing surprised her anymore, though the variation in customers and their businesses was dizzying. The Circle was everywhere, and though she'd known this for years, intuitively, hearing from these people, the businesses counting on the Circle to get the word out about their products, to track their digital impact, to know who was buying their wares and when—it became real on a very different level. Mae now had customer contacts in Clinton, Louisiana, and Putney, Vermont; in Marmaris, Turkey and Melbourne and Glasgow and Kyoto. Invariably they were polite in their queries—the legacy of TruYou—and gracious in their ratings.

By midmorning that Friday, her aggregate for the week was at 97, and the affirmations were coming from everyone in the Circle. The work was demanding, and the flow did not stop, but it varied just enough, and the validation was frequent enough, that she settled into a comfortable rhythm.

Just as she was about to take another request, a text came through her phone. It was Annie: *Eat with me, fool*.

They sat on a low hill, two salads between them, the sun making intermittent appearances behind slow-moving clouds. Mae and Annie watched a trio of young men, pale and dressed like engineers, attempting to throw a football.

"So you're already a star. I feel like a proud mama."

Mae shook her head. "I'm not at all. I have a lot to learn."

"Of course you do. But a 97 so far? That's insane. I didn't get above 95 the first week. You're a natural."

A pair of shadows darkened their lunch.

"Can we meet the newbie?"

Mae looked up, shielding her eyes.

"Course," Annie said.

The shadows sat down. Annie jabbed her fork at them. "This is Sabine and Josef."

Mae shook their hands. Sabine was blond, sturdy, squinting. Josef was thin, pale, with comically bad teeth.

"Already she's looking at my teeth!" he wailed, pointing to Mae. "You Americans are *obsessed!* I feel like a horse at an auction."

"But your teeth *are* bad," Annie said. "And we have such a good dental plan here."

Josef unwrapped a burrito. "I think my teeth provide a necessary respite from the eerie perfection of everyone else's."

Annie tilted her head, studying him. "I'm sure you *should* fix them, if not for you for the sake of company morale. You give people nightmares."

Josef pouted theatrically, his mouth full of carne asada. Annie patted his arm.

Sabine turned to Mae. "So you're in Customer Experience?" Now Mae noticed the tattoo on Sabine's arm, the symbol for infinity.

"I am. First week."

"I saw you're doing pretty well so far. I started there, too. Just about everyone did."

"And Sabine's a biochemist," Annie added.

Mae was surprised. "You're a biochemist?"

"I am."

Mae hadn't heard about biochemists working at the Circle. "Can I ask what you're working on?"

"Can you *ask?*" Sabine smiled. "Of course you can *ask*. But I don't have to tell you anything."

Everyone sighed for a moment, but then Sabine stopped.

"Seriously though, I can't tell you. Not right now, anyway. Generally I work on stuff for the biometric side of things. You know, iris scanning and facial recognition. But right now I'm on something new. Even though I'd like to—"

Annie gave Sabine an imploring, quieting look. Sabine filled her mouth with lettuce.

"Anyway," Annie said, "Josef here is in Educational Access. He's trying to get tablets into schools that right now can't afford them. He's a do-gooder. He's also friends with your new friend. Garbonzo."

"Garaventa," Mae corrected.

"Ah. You *do* remember. Have you seen him again?"

"Not this week. It's been too busy."

Now Josef's mouth was open. Something had just dawned on him. "Are you Mae?"

Annie winced. "We already said that. Of course this is Mae."

"Sorry. I didn't hear it right. Now I know who you are."

Annie snorted. "What, did you two little girls tell each other all about Francis's big night? He's been writing Mae's name in his notebook, surrounded by hearts?"

Josef inhaled indulgently. "No, he just said he'd met someone very nice, and her name was Mae."

"That's so sweet," Sabine said.

"He told her he was in security," Annie said. "Why would he do that, Josef?"

"That's not what he said," Mae insisted. "I told you that."

Annie didn't seem to care. "Well, I guess you could call it security. He's in child safety. He's basically the core of this whole program to prevent abductions. He actually could do it."

Sabine, her mouth full again, was nodding vigorously. "Of course he will," she said, spraying fragments of salad and vinaigrette. "It's a done deal."

"What is?" Mae asked. "He's going to prevent all abductions?"

"He could," Josef said. "He's motivated."

Annie's eyes went wide. "Did he tell you about his sisters?"

Mae shook her head. "No, he didn't say he had siblings. What about his sisters?"

All three Circlers looked at each other, as if to gauge if the story had to be told there and then.

"It's the worst story," Annie said. "His parents were such fuckups. I think there were like four or five kids in the family, and Francis was youngest or second-youngest, and anyway the dad was in jail, and the mom was on drugs, so the kids were sent all over the place. I think one went to his aunt and uncle, and his two sisters were sent to some foster home, and then they were abducted from there. I guess there was some doubt if they were, you know, given or sold to the murderers."

"The what?" Mae had gone limp.

"Oh god, they were raped and kept in closets and their bodies were dropped down some kind of abandoned missile silo. I mean, it was the worst story ever. He told a bunch of us about it when he was pitching this child safety program. Shit, look at your face. I shouldn't have said all this."

Mae couldn't speak.

"It's important that you know," Josef said. "This is why he's so passionate. I mean, his plan would pretty much eliminate the possibility of anything like this ever happening again. Wait. What time is it?"

Annie checked her phone. “You’re right. We gotta scoot. Bailey’s doing an unveiling. We should be in the Great Hall.”

The Great Hall was in the Enlightenment, and when they entered the venue, a 3,500-seat cavern appointed in warm woods and brushed steel, it was loud with anticipation. Mae and Annie found one of the last pairs of seats in the second balcony and sat down.

“Just finished this a few months ago,” Annie said. “Forty-five million dollars. Bailey modeled the stripes off the Duomo in Siena. Nice, right?”

Mae’s attention was pulled to the stage, where a man was walking to a lucite podium, amid a roar of applause. He was a tall man of about forty-five, round in the gut but not unhealthy, wearing jeans and blue V-neck sweater. There was no discernible microphone, but when he began speaking, his voice was amplified and clear.

“Hello everyone. My name is Eamon Bailey,” he said, to another round of applause that he quickly discouraged. “Thank you. I’m so glad to see you all here. A bunch of you are new to the company since I last spoke, one whole month ago. Can the newbies stand up?” Annie nudged Mae. Mae stood, and looked around the auditorium to see about sixty other people standing, most of them her age, all of them seeming shy, all of them quietly stylish, together representing every race and ethnicity and, thanks to the Circle’s efforts to ease permits for international staffers, a dizzying range of national origins. The clapping from the rest of the Circlers was loud, a sprinkling of whoops mixed in. She sat down.

“You’re so cute when you blush,” Annie said.

Mae sunk into her seat.

“Newbies,” Bailey said, “you’re in for something special. This is called Dream Friday, where we present something we’re working on. Often it’s one of our engineers or designers or visionaries, and sometimes it’s just me. And today, for better or for worse, it’s just me. For that I apologize in advance.”

“We love you Eamon!” came a voice from the audience. Laughter followed.

“Well thank you,” he said, “I love you back. I love you as the grass loves the dew, as the birds love a bough.” He paused briefly, allowing Mae to catch her breath. She’d seen these talks online, but being here, in person, seeing Bailey’s mind at work, hearing his off-the-cuff eloquence—it was better than she thought possible. What would it be like, she thought, to be someone like that, eloquent and inspirational, so at ease in front of thousands?

“Yes,” he continued, “it’s been a whole month since I’ve gotten up on this stage, and I know my replacements have been unsatisfying. I am sorry to deprive you of myself. I realize there is no substitute.” The joke brought laughter throughout the hall. “And I know a lot of you have been wondering just where the heck I’ve been.”

A voice from the front of the room yelled “surfing!” and the room laughed.

“Well, that’s right. I have been doing some surfing, and that’s part of what I’m here to talk about. I love to surf, and when I want to surf, I need to know how the waves are. Now, it used to be that you’d wake up and call the local surf shop and ask them about the breaks. And pretty soon they stopped answering their phones.”

Knowing laughter came from the older contingent in the room.

“When cellphones proliferated, you could call your buddies who might have gotten out to the beach before you. They, too, stopped answering their phones.”

Another big laugh from the audience.

“Seriously, though. It’s not practical to make twelve calls every morning, and can you trust someone else’s take on the conditions? The surfers don’t want any more bodies on the

limited breaks we get up here. So then the internet happened, and here and there some geniuses set up cameras on the beaches. We could log on and get some pretty crude images of the waves at Stinson Beach. It was almost worse than calling the surf shop! The technology was pretty primitive. Streaming technology still is. Or was. Until now."

A screen descended behind him.

"Okay. Here's how it used to look."

The screen showed a standard browser display, and an unseen hand typed in the url for a website called SurfSight. A poorly designed site appeared, with a tiny image of a coastline streaming in the middle. It was pixilated and comically slow. The audience tittered.

"Almost useless, right? Now, as we know, streaming video has gotten a lot better in recent years. But it's still slower than real life, and the screen quality is pretty disappointing. So we've solved, I think, the quality issues in the last year. Let's now refresh that page to show the site with our new video delivery."

Now the page was refreshed, and the coastline was full-screen, and the resolution was perfect. There were sounds of awe throughout the room.

"Yes, this is live video of Stinson Beach. This is Stinson right at this moment. Looks pretty good, right? Maybe I should be out there, as opposed to standing here with you!"

Annie leaned into Mae. "The next part's incredible. Just wait."

"Now, many of you still aren't so impressed. As we all know, many machines can deliver high-res streaming video, and many of your tablets and phones can already support them. But there are a couple new aspects to all this. The first part is how we're getting this image. Would it surprise you to know that this isn't coming from a big camera, but actually just one of these?"

He was holding a small device in his hand, the shape and size of a lollipop.

"This is a video camera, and this is the precise model that's getting this incredible image quality. Image quality that holds up to this kind of magnification. So that's the first great thing. We can now get high-def-quality resolution in a camera the size of a thumb. Well, a very big thumb. The second great thing is that, as you can see, this camera needs no wires. It's transmitting this image via satellite."

A round of applause shook the room.

"Wait. Did I say it runs on a lithium battery that lasts two years? No? Well it does. And we're a year away from an entirely solar-powered model, too. And it's waterproof, sand-proof, windproof, animal-proof, insect-proof, everything-proof."

More applause overtook the room.

"Okay, so I set up that camera this morning. I taped it to a stake, stuck that stake in the sand, in the dunes, with no permit, nothing. In fact, no one knows it's there. So this morning I turned it on, then I drove back to the office, accessed Camera One, Stinson Beach, and I got this image. Not bad. But that's not the half of it. Actually, I was pretty busy this morning. I drove around, and set up one at Rodeo Beach, too."

And now the original image, of Stinson Beach, shrunk and moved to a corner of the screen. Another box emerged, showing the waves at Rodeo Beach, a few miles down the Pacific coast. "And now Montara. And Ocean Beach. Fort Point." With each beach Bailey mentioned, another live image appeared. There were now six beaches in a grid, each of them live, visible with perfect clarity and brilliant color.

"Now remember: no one sees these cameras. I've hidden them pretty well. To the average person they look like weeds, or some kind of stick. Anything. They're unnoticed. So in a few hours this morning, I set up perfectly clear video access to six locations that help me know how

to plan my day. And everything we do here is about knowing the previously unknown, right?"

Heads nodded. A smattering of applause.

"Okay, so, many of you are thinking, Well, this is just like closed-circuit TV crossed with streaming technology, satellites, all that. Fine. But as you know, to do this with extant technology would have been prohibitively expensive for the average person. But what if all this was accessible and affordable to anyone? My friends, we're looking at retailing these—in just a few months, mind you—at fifty-nine dollars each."

Bailey held the lollipop camera out, and threw it to someone in the front row. The woman who caught it held it aloft, turning to the audience and smiling gleefully.

"You can buy ten of them for Christmas and suddenly you have constant access to everywhere you want to be—home, work, traffic conditions. And anyone can install them. It takes five minutes tops. Think of the implications!"

The screen behind him cleared, the beaches disappearing, and a new grid appeared.

"Here's the view from my back yard," he said, revealing a live feed of a tidy and modest back yard. "Here's my front yard. My garage. Here's one on a hill overlooking Highway 101 where it gets bad during rush hour. Here's one near my parking space to make sure no one parks there."

And soon the screen had sixteen discrete images on it, all of them transmitting live feed.

"Now, these are just *my* cameras. I access them all by simply typing in Camera 1, 2, 3, 12, whatever. Easy. But what about sharing? That is, what if my buddy has some cameras posted, and wants to give me access?"

And now the screen's grid multiplied, from sixteen boxes to thirty-two. "Here's Lionel Fitzpatrick's screens. He's into skiing, so he's got cameras positioned so he can tell the conditions at twelve locations all over Tahoe."

Now there were twelve live images of white-topped mountains, ice-blue valleys, ridges topped with deep green conifers.

"Lionel can give me access to any of the cameras he wants. It's just like friending someone, but now with access to all their live feeds. Forget cable. Forget five hundred channels. If you have one thousand friends, and they have ten cameras each, you now have ten thousand options for live footage. If you have five thousand friends, you have fifty thousand options. And soon you'll be able to connect to millions of cameras around the world. Again, imagine the implications!"

The screen atomized into a thousand mini-screens. Beaches, mountains, lakes, cities, offices, living rooms. The crowd applauded wildly. Then the screen went blank, and from the black emerged a peace sign, in white.

"Now imagine the human rights implications. Protesters on the streets of Egypt no longer have to hold up a camera, hoping to catch a human rights violation or a murder and then somehow get the footage out of the streets and online. Now it's as easy as gluing a camera to a wall. Actually, we've done just that."

A stunned hush came over the audience.

"Let's have Camera 8 in Cairo."

A live shot of a street scene appeared. There were banners lying on the street, a pair of police in riot gear standing in the distance.

"They don't know we see them, but we do. The world is watching. And listening. Turn up the audio."

Suddenly they could hear a clear conversation, in Arabic, between pedestrians passing

near the camera, unawares.

"And of course most of the cameras can be manipulated manually or with voice recognition. Watch this. Camera 8, turn left." On screen, the camera's view of the Cairo street panned left. "Now right." It panned right. He demonstrated it moving up, down, diagonally, all with remarkable fluidity.

The audience applauded again.

"Now, remember that these cameras are cheap, and easy to hide, and they need no wires. So it hasn't been that hard for us to place them all over. Let's show Tahrir."

Gasps from the audience. On screen there was now a live shot of Tahrir Square, the cradle of the Egyptian Revolution.

"We've had our people in Cairo attaching cameras for the last week. They're so small the army can't find them. They don't even know where to look! Let's show the rest of the views. Camera 2. Camera 3. Four. Five. Six."

There were six shots of the square, each so clear that sweat on any face could be seen, the nametags of every soldier easily read.

"Now 7 through 50."

Now there was a grid of fifty images, seeming to cover the entire public space. The audience roared again. Bailey raised his hands, as if to say "Not yet. There's plenty more."

"The square is quiet now, but can you imagine if something happened? There would be instant accountability. Any soldier committing an act of violence would instantly be recorded for posterity. He could be tried for war crimes, you name it. And even if they clear the square of journalists, the cameras are still there. And no matter how many times they try to eliminate the cameras, because they're so small, they'll never know for sure where they are, who's placed them where and when. And the not-knowing will prevent abuses of power. You take the average soldier who's now worried that a dozen cameras will catch him, for all eternity, dragging some woman down the street? Well, he should worry. He should worry about these cameras. He should worry about SeeChange. That's what we're calling them."

There was a quick burst of applause, which grew as the audience came to understand the double-meaning at play.

"Like it?" Bailey said. "Okay, now this doesn't just apply to areas of upheaval. Imagine any city with this kind of coverage. Who would commit a crime knowing they might be watched any time, anywhere? My friends in the FBI feel this would cut crime rates down by 70, 80 percent in any city where we have real and meaningful saturation."

The applause grew.

"But for now, let's go back to the places in the world where we most need transparency and so rarely have it. Here's a medley of locations around the world where we've placed cameras. Now imagine the impact these cameras would have had in the past, and will have in the future, if similar events transpire. Here's fifty cameras in Tiananmen Square."

Live shots from all over the square filled the screen, and the crowd erupted again. Bailey went on, revealing their coverage of a dozen authoritarian regimes, from Khartoum to Pyongyang, where the authorities had no idea they were being watched by three thousand Circlers in California—had no notion that they *could* be watched, that this technology was or would ever be possible.

Now Bailey cleared the screen again, and stepped toward the audience. "You know what I say, right? In situations like this, I agree with the Hague, with human rights activists the world over. There needs to be accountability. Tyrants can no longer hide. There needs to be, and will

be, documentation and accountability, and we need to bear witness. And to this end, I insist that all that happens should be known."

The words dropped onto the screen:

ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN.

"Folks, we're at the dawn of the Second Enlightenment. And I'm not talking about a new building on campus. I'm talking about an era where we don't allow the majority of human thought and action and achievement and learning to escape as if from a leaky bucket. We did that once before. It was called the Middle Ages, the Dark Ages. If not for the monks, everything the world had ever learned would have been lost. Well, we live in a similar time, when we're losing the vast majority of what we do and see and learn. But it doesn't have to be that way. Not with these cameras, and not with the mission of the Circle."

He turned again toward the screen and read it, inviting the audience to commit it to memory.

ALL THAT HAPPENS MUST BE KNOWN.

He turned back to the audience and smiled.

"Okay, now I want to bring it back home. My mother's eighty-one. She doesn't get around as easily as she once did. A year ago she fell and broke her hip, and since then I've been concerned about her. I asked her to have some security cameras installed, so I could access them on a closed circuit, but she refused. But now I have peace of mind. Last weekend, while she was napping—"

A wave of laughter rippled through the audience.

"Forgive me! Forgive me!" he said, "I had no choice. She wouldn't have let me do it otherwise. So I snuck in, and I installed cameras in every room. They're so small she'll never notice. I'll show you really quick. Can we show cameras 1 to 5 in my mom's house?"

A grid of images popped up, including his mom, padding down a bright hallway in a towel. A roar of laughter erupted.

"Oops. Let's drop that one." The image disappeared. "Anyway. The point is that I know she's safe, and that gives me a sense of peace. As we all know here at the Circle, transparency leads to peace of mind. No longer do I have to wonder, 'How's Mom?' No longer do I have to wonder, 'What's happening in Myanmar?'

"Now, we're making a million of this model, and my prediction is that within a year we'll have a million accessible live streams. Within five years, fifty million. Within ten years, two billion cameras. There will be very few populated areas that we won't be able to access from the screens in our hands."

The audience roared again. Someone yelled out, "We want it now!"

Bailey continued. "Instead of searching the web, only to find some edited video with terrible quality, now you go to SeeChange, you type in Myanmar. Or you type in your high school boyfriend's name. Chances are there's someone who's set up a camera nearby, right? Why shouldn't your curiosity about the world be rewarded? You want to see Fiji but can't get there? SeeChange. You want to check on your kid at school? SeeChange. This is ultimate transparency. No filter. See everything. Always."

Mae leaned toward Annie. "This is incredible."

"I know, right?" Annie said.

"Now, do these cameras have to be stationary?" Bailey said, raising a scolding finger. "Of course not. I happen to have a dozen helpers all over the world right now, wearing the cameras around their necks. Let's visit them, shall we? Can I get Danny's camera up?"

An image of Machu Picchu appeared onscreen. It looked like a postcard, a view perched high above the ancient ruins. And then it started moving, down toward the site. The crowd gasped, then cheered.

"That's a live image, though I guess that's obvious. Hi Danny. Now let's get Sarah on Mount Kenya." Another image appeared on the great screen, this one of the shale fields high on the mountain. "Can you point us toward the peak, Sarah?" The camera panned up, revealing the peak of the mountain, enshrouded in fog. "See, this opens up the possibility of visual surrogates. Imagine I'm bedridden, or too frail to explore the mountain myself. I send someone up with a camera around her neck, and I can experience it all in real time. Let's do that in a few more places." He presented live images of Paris, Kuala Lumpur, a London pub.

"Now let's experiment a bit, using all of this together. I'm sitting at home. I log on and want to get a sense of the world. Show me traffic on 101. Streets of Jakarta. Surfing at Bolinas. My mom's house. Show me the webcams of everyone I went to high school with."

At every command, new images appeared, until there were at least a hundred live streaming images on the screen at once.

"We will become all-seeing, all-knowing."

The audience was standing now. The applause thundered through the room. Mae rested her head on Annie's shoulder.

"All that happens will be known," Annie whispered.

"You have a glow."

"You do."

"I do not have a glow."

"Like you're with child."

"I know what you meant. Stop."

Mae's father reached across the table and took her hand. It was Saturday, and her parents were treating her to a celebratory dinner commemorating her first week at the Circle. This was the kind of sentimental slop they were always doing—at least recently. When she was younger, the only child of a couple who long considered the possibility of having none at all, their home was more complicated. During the week, her father had been scarce. He'd been the building manager at a Fresno office park, working fourteen-hour days and leaving everything at home to her mother, who worked three shifts a week at a hotel restaurant and who responded to the pressure of it all with a hair-trigger temper, primarily directed at Mae. But when Mae was ten, her parents announced they'd bought a parking lot, two stories near downtown Fresno, and for a few years, they took turns manning it. It was humiliating to Mae to have her friends' parents say, "Hey, saw your mom at the lot," or "Tell your dad thanks again for comping me the other day," but soon their finances stabilized, and they could hire a couple guys to trade shifts. And when her parents could take a day off, and could plan more than a few months ahead, they mellowed, becoming a very calm, exasperatingly sweet older couple. It was as if they went, in the course of a year, from being young parents in over their heads, to grandparents, slow-moving and warm and clueless about what exactly their daughter wanted. When she graduated from middle school, they'd driven her to Disneyland, not quite understanding that she was too old, and that her going there alone—with two adults, which was effectively alone—was at cross-purposes with any notion of fun. But they were so well-meaning that she couldn't refuse, and in the end they had a mindless kind of fun that she didn't know was possible with one's parents. Any lingering resentment she might direct at them for the emotional uncertainties of her early life was doused by the constant cool water of their late middle age.

And now they'd driven to the bay, to spend the weekend at the cheapest bed and breakfast they could find—which was fifteen miles from the Circle and looked haunted. Now they were out, at some fake-fancy restaurant the two of them had heard about, and if anyone was aglow, it was them. They were beaming.

"So? It's been great?" her mother asked.

"It has."

"I knew it." Her mother sat back, crossing her arms.

"I don't ever want to work anywhere else," Mae said.

"What a relief," her father said. "We don't want you working anywhere else, either."

Her mother lunged forward, and took Mae's arm. "I told Karolina's mom. You know her." She scrunched her nose—the closest she could come to an insult. "She looked like someone had stuck a sharp stick up her behind. Boiling with envy."

"Mom."

"I let your salary slip."

"Mom."

"I just said, 'I hope she can get by with a salary of sixty thousand dollars.' "

"I can't believe you told her that."

"It's true, isn't it?"

"It's actually sixty-two."

"Oh jeez. Now I'll have to call her up."

"No you won't."

"Okay, I won't. But it's been very fun," she said, "I just casually slip it into conversation. My daughter's at the hottest company on the planet and has full dental."

"Please don't. I just got lucky. And Annie—"

Her father leaned forward. "How *is* Annie?"

"Good."

"Tell Annie we love her."

"I will."

"She couldn't come tonight?"

"No. She's busy."

"But you asked her?"

"I did. She says hi. But she works a lot."

"What does she do exactly?" her mother asked.

"Everything, really," Mae said. "She's in the Gang of 40. She's part of all the big decisions. I think she specializes in dealing with regulatory issues in other countries."

"I'm sure she's got a lot of responsibility."

"And stock options!" her father said. "I can't imagine what she's worth."

"Dad. Don't imagine that."

"Why is she working with all those stock options? I'd be on a beach. I'd have a harem."

Mae's mother put her hand on his. "Vinnie, stop." Then to Mae she said, "I hope she has time to enjoy it all."

"She does," Mae said. "She's probably at a campus party as we speak."

Her father smiled. "I love that you call it a campus. That's very cool. We used to call those places *offices*."

Mae's mother seemed troubled. "A party, Mae? You didn't want to go?"

"I did, but I wanted to see you guys. And there are plenty of those parties."

"But in your first week!" her mother looked pained. "Maybe you should have gone. Now I feel bad. We took you away from it."

"Trust me. They have them every other day. They're very social over there. I'll be fine."

"You're not taking lunch yet, are you?" her mother asked. She made the same point when Mae had started at the utility: don't take lunch your first week. Sends the wrong message.

"Don't worry," Mae said. "I haven't even used the bathroom."

Her mother rolled her eyes. "Anyway, let me just say how proud we are. We love you."

"And Annie," her father said.

"Right. We love you and Annie."

They ate quickly, knowing that Mae's father would soon tire. He'd insisted on going out to dinner, though back at home, he rarely did anymore. His fatigue was constant, and could come on suddenly and strong, sending him to near-collapse. It was important, when out like this, to be ready to make a quick exit, and before dessert, they did so. Mae followed them back to their room and there, amid the B&B owners' dozens of dolls, spread about the room and watching, Mae and her parents were able to relax, unafraid of eventualities. Mae hadn't gotten used to her father having multiple sclerosis. The diagnosis had come down only two years earlier, though the symptoms had been visible years before that. He'd been slurring his words, had been overshooting when reaching for things and, finally, had fallen, twice, each time in the foyer of their house, reaching for the front door. So they'd sold the parking lot, made a decent profit, and now spent their time managing his care, which meant at least a few hours a day poring over medical bills and battling with the insurance company.

"Oh, we saw Mercer the other day," her mother said, and her father smiled. Mercer had been a boyfriend of Mae's, one of the four serious ones she'd had in high school and college. But as far as her parents were concerned, he was the only one who mattered, or the only one they acknowledged or remembered. It helped that he still lived in town.

"That's good," Mae said, wanting to end the topic. "He still makes chandeliers out of antlers?"

"Easy there," her father said, hearing her barbed tone. "He's got his own business. And not that he'd brag, but it's apparently thriving."

Mae needed to change the subject. "I've averaged 97 so far," she said. "They say that's a record for a newbie."

The look on her parents' faces was bewilderment. Her father blinked slowly. They had no idea what she was talking about. "What's that, hon?" her father said.

Mae let it go. When she'd heard the words leave her mouth, she knew the sentence would take too long to explain. "How are things with the insurance?" she asked, and instantly regretted it. Why did she ask questions like this? The answer would swallow the night.

"Not good," her mother said. "I don't know. We have the wrong plan. I mean, they don't want to insure your dad, plain and simple, and they seem to be doing everything they can to get us to leave. But how can we leave? We'd have nowhere to go."

Her father sat up. "Tell her about the prescription."

"Oh, right. Your dad's been on Copaxone for two years, for the pain. He needs it. Without it—"

"The pain gets … ornery," he said.

"Now the insurance says he doesn't need it. It's not on their list of pre-approved medications. Even though he's been using it two years!"

"It seems unnecessarily cruel," Mae's father said.

"They've offered no alternative. Nothing for the pain!"

Mae didn't know what to say. "I'm sorry. Can I look up some alternatives online? I mean, have you seen if the doctors could find another drug that the insurance will pay for? Maybe a generic …"

This went on for an hour, and by the end, Mae was wrecked. The MS, her helplessness to slow it, her inability to bring back the life her father had known—it tortured her, but the insurance situation was something else, was an unnecessary crime, a piling-on. Didn't the insurance companies realize that the cost of their obfuscation, denial, all the frustration they caused, only made her father's health worse, and threatened that of her mother? If nothing else, it was inefficient. The time spent denying coverage, arguing, dismissing, thwarting—surely it was more trouble than simply granting her parents access to the right care.

"Enough of this," her mother said. "We brought you a surprise. Where is it? You have it, Vinnie?"

They gathered on the high bed covered with a threadbare patchwork quilt, and her father presented Mae with a small wrapped gift. The size and shape of the box suggested a necklace, but Mae knew it couldn't be that. When she got the wrapping off, she opened the velvet box and laughed. It was a pen, one of the rarefied kind that's silver and strangely heavy, requiring care and filling and mostly for show.

"Don't worry, we didn't buy it," Mae's father said.

"Vinnie!" her mother wailed.

"Seriously," he said, "we didn't. A friend of mine gave it to me last year. He felt bad I couldn't work. I don't know what kind of use he thought I'd have for a pen when I can barely type. But this guy was never so bright."

"We thought it would look good on your desk," her mother added.

"Are we the best or what?" her father said.

Mae's mother laughed, and most crucially, Mae's father laughed. He laughed a big belly laugh. In the second, calmer phase of their lives as parents, he'd become a laugher, a constant laugher, a man who laughed at everything. It was the primary sound of Mae's teenage years. He laughed at things that were clearly funny, and at things that would provoke just a smile in most, and he laughed when he should have been upset. When Mae misbehaved, he thought it was hilarious. He'd caught her sneaking out of her bedroom window one night, to see Mercer, and he'd practically keeled over. Everything was comical, everything about her adolescence cracked him up. "You should have seen your face when you saw me! Priceless!"

But then the MS diagnosis arrived and most of that was gone. The pain was constant. The spells where he couldn't get up, didn't trust his legs to carry him, were too frequent, too dangerous. He was in the emergency room weekly. And finally, with some heroic efforts from Mae's mom, he saw a few doctors who cared, and he was put on the right drugs and stabilized, at least for a while. And then the insurance debacles, the descent into this health care purgatory.

This night, though, he was buoyant, and her mother was feeling good, having found some sherry in the B&B's tiny kitchen, which she shared with Mae. Her father was soon enough asleep in his clothes, over the covers, with all the lights on, with Mae and her mother still talking at full volume. When they noticed he was out cold Mae arranged a bed for herself at the foot of theirs.

In the morning they slept late and drove to a diner for lunch. Her father ate well, and Mae watched her mother feign nonchalance, the two of them talking about a wayward uncle's latest bizarre business venture, something about raising lobsters in rice paddies. Mae knew her mother was nervous, every moment, about her father, having him out for two meals in a row, and

watched him closely. He looked cheerful but his strength faded quickly.

"You guys settle up," he said. "I'm going to the car to recline for a moment."

"We can help," Mae said, but her mother hushed her. Her father was already up and headed for the door.

"He gets tired. It's fine," her mother said. "It's just a different routine now. He rests. He does things, he walks and eats and is animated for a while, then he rests. It's very regular and very calming, to tell you the truth."

They paid the bill and walked out to the parking lot. Mae saw the white wisps of her father's hair through the car window. Most of his head was below the windowframe, reclined so far he was in the back seat. When they arrived at the car, they saw that he was awake, looking up into the interlocking boughs of an unremarkable tree. He rolled down the window.

"Well, this has been wonderful," he said.

Mae made her goodbyes and left, happy to have the afternoon free. She drove west, the day sunny and calm, the colors of the passing landscape simple and clear, blues and yellows and greens. As she approached the coast, she turned toward the bay. She could get a few hours of kayaking in if she hurried.

Mercer had introduced her to kayaking, an activity that until then she'd considered awkward and dull. Sitting at the waterline, struggling to move that strange ice-cream-spoon paddle. The constant twisting looked painful, and the pace seemed far too slow. But then she'd tried it, with Mercer, using not professional-grade models but something more basic, the kind the rider sits on top of, legs and feet exposed. They'd paddled around the bay, moving far quicker than she'd expected, and they'd seen harbor seals, and pelicans, and Mae was convinced this was a criminally underappreciated sport, and the bay a body of water woefully underused.

They'd launched from a tiny beach, the outfitter requiring no training or equipment or fuss; you just paid your fifteen dollars an hour and in minutes were on the bay, cold and clear.

Today, she pulled off the highway and made her way to the beach, and there she found the water placid, glassine.

"Hey you," said a voice.

Mae turned to find an older woman, bowlegged and frizzy-haired. This was Marion, owner of Maiden's Voyages. She was the maiden, and had been for fifteen years, since she'd opened the business, after striking it rich in stationery. She'd told Mae this during her first rental, and told everyone this story, which Marion assumed was amusing, that she'd made money selling stationery and opened a kayak and paddle-board rental operation. Why Marion thought this was funny Mae never knew. But Marion was warm and accommodating, even when Mae was asking to take out a kayak a few hours before closing, as she was this day.

"Gorgeous out there," Marion said. "Just don't go far."

Marion helped her pull the kayak across the sand and rocks and into the tiny waves. She clicked on Mae's life preserver. "And remember, don't bother any of the houseboat people. Their living rooms are at your eye level, so no snooping. You want footies or a windbreaker today?" she asked. "Might get choppy."

Mae declined and got into the kayak, barefoot and wearing the cardigan and jeans she wore to brunch. In seconds she had paddled beyond the fishing boats, past the breakers and paddle-boarders and was in the open water of the bay.

She saw no one. That this body of water was so seldom used had confounded her for months. There were no jetskis here. Few casual fishermen, no waterskiers, the occasional motorboat. There were sailboats, but not nearly as many as one would expect. The frigid water

was only part of it. Maybe there were simply too many other things to do outdoors in Northern California? It was mysterious, but Mae had no complaint. It left more water to her.

She paddled into the belly of the bay. The water did indeed get choppier, and cold water washed over her feet. It felt good, so good she reached her hand down and scooped a handful and drenched her face and the back of her neck. When she opened her eyes she saw a harbor seal, twenty feet in front of her, staring at her as would a calm dog whose yard she'd walked into. His head was rounded, grey, with the glossy sheen of polished marble.

She kept her paddle on her lap, watching the seal as it watched her. Its eyes were black buttons, unreflective. She didn't move, and the seal didn't move. They were locked in mutual regard, and the moment, the way it stretched and luxuriated in itself, asked for continuation. Why move?

A gust of wind came her way, and with it the pungent smell of the seal. She had noticed this the last time she had kayaked, the strong smell of these animals, a cross between tuna and unwashed dog. It was better to be upwind. As if suddenly embarrassed, the seal ducked underwater.

Mae continued on, away from shore. She set a goal to make it to a red buoy she spotted, near the bend of a peninsula, deep in the bay. Getting to it would take thirty minutes or so, and en route, she would pass a few dozen anchored barges and sailboats. Many had been made into homes of one kind or another, and she knew not to look into the windows, but she couldn't help it; there were mysteries aboard. Why was there a motorcycle on this barge? Why a Confederate flag on that yacht? Far off, she saw a seaplane circling.

The wind picked up behind her, sending her quickly past the red buoy and closer to the farther shore. She hadn't planned to land there, and had never made it across the bay, but soon it was in sight and coming quickly upon her, eelgrass visible beneath her as the water went shallow.

She jumped out of the kayak, her feet landing on the stones, all rounded and smooth. As she was pulling the kayak up, the bay rose up and engulfed her legs. It wasn't a wave; it was more of a sudden uniform rising of the water level. One second she was standing on a dry shore and the next the water was at her shins and she was soaked.

When the water fell again, it left a wide swath of bizarre, bejeweled seaweed—blue, and green, and, in a certain light, iridescent. She held it in her hands, and it was smooth, rubbery, its edges ruffled extravagantly. Mae's feet were wet, and the water was snow cold but she didn't mind. She sat on the rocky beach, picked up a stick and drew with it, clicking through the smooth stones. Tiny crabs, unearthed and annoyed, scurried to find new shelters. A pelican landed downshore, on the trunk of a dead tree, which had been bleached white and leaned diagonally, rising from the steel-grey water, pointing lazily to the sky.

And then Mae found herself sobbing. Her father was a mess. No, he wasn't a mess. He was managing it all with great dignity. But there had been something very tired about him that morning, something defeated, accepting, as if he knew that he couldn't fight both what was happening in his body and the companies managing his care. And there was nothing she could do for him. No, there was too much to do for him. She could quit her job. She could quit and help make the phone calls, fight the many fights to keep him well. This is what a good daughter would do. What a good child, an only child, would do. A good only child would spend the next three to five years, which might be his last years of mobility, of full capability, with him, helping him, helping her mother, being part of the family machinery. But she knew her parents wouldn't let her do all that. They wouldn't allow it. And so she would be caught between the job she

needed and loved, and her parents, whom she couldn't help.

But it felt good to cry, to let her shoulders shake, to feel the hot tears on her face, to taste their baby salt, to wipe snot all over the underside of her shirt. And when she was done, she pushed the kayak out again and she found herself paddling at a brisk pace. Once in the middle of the bay, she stopped. Her tears were dry now, her breathing steady. She was calm and felt strong, but instead of reaching the red buoy, which she no longer had any interest in, she sat, her paddle on her lap, letting the waves tilt her gently, feeling the warm sun dry her hands and feet. She often did this when she was far from any shore—she just sat still, feeling the vast volume of the ocean beneath her. There were leopard sharks in this part of the bay, and bat rays, and jellyfish, and the occasional harbor porpoise, but she could see none of them. They were hidden in the dark water, in their black parallel world, and knowing they were there, but not knowing where, or really anything else, felt, at that moment, strangely right. Far beyond, she could see where the mouth of the bay led to the ocean and there, making its way through a band of light fog, she saw an enormous container ship heading into open water. She thought about moving, but saw no point. There seemed no reason to go anywhere. Being here, in the middle of the bay, nothing to do or see, was plenty. She stayed there, drifting slowly, for the better part of an hour. Occasionally she would smell that dog-and-tuna smell again, and turn to find another curious seal, and they would watch each other, and she would wonder if the seal knew, as she did, how good this was, how lucky they were to have all this to themselves.

By the late afternoon, the winds coming from the Pacific picked up, and getting back to shore was trying. When she got home her limbs were leaden and her head was slow. She made herself a salad and ate half a bag of chips, staring out the window. She fell asleep at eight and slept for eleven hours.

The morning was busy, as Dan had warned her it would be. He'd gathered her and the hundred-odd other CE reps at eight a.m., reminding them all that opening the chute on Monday morning was always a hazardous thing. All the customers who wanted answers over the weekend certainly expected them on Monday morning.

He was right. The chute opened, the deluge arrived, and Mae worked against the flood until eleven or so, when there was something like respite. She'd handled forty-nine queries and her score was at 91, her lowest aggregate yet.

Don't worry, Jared messaged. *Par for the course on Monday. Just go after as many follow-ups as you can.*

Mae had been following up all morning, with limited results. The clients were grumpy. The only good news that morning came from the intra-company feed, when a message from Francis appeared, asking her to lunch. Officially she and the other CE staff were given an hour for the meal, but she hadn't seen anyone else leave their desk for more than twenty minutes. She gave herself that much time, though her mother's words, equating lunch with a monumental breach of duty, rattled in her mind.

She was late getting to the Glass Eatery. She looked around, and up, and finally saw him sitting a few levels above, his feet dangling from a high lucite stool. She waved, but couldn't get his attention. She yelled up to him, as discreetly as she could, to no avail. Then, feeling foolish, she texted him, and watched as he received the text, looked around the cafeteria, found her, and waved.

She made her way through the line, got a veggie burrito and some kind of new organic soda, and sat down next to him. He was wearing a wrinkled clean button-down shirt and carpenter's pants. His perch overlooked the outdoor pool, where a group of staffers were

approximating a game of volleyball.

"Not such an athletic group," he noted.

"No," Mae agreed. As he watched the chaotic splashing below, she tried to overlay this face in front of her with the one she remembered from her first night. There were the same heavy brows, the same prominent nose. But now Francis seemed to have shrunk. His hands, using a knife and fork to cut his burrito in two, seemed unusually delicate.

"It's almost perverse," he said, "having so much athletic equipment here when there's no athletic aptitude at all. It's like a family of Christian Scientists living next to a pharmacy." Now he turned to her. "Thanks for coming. I wondered if I'd see you again."

"Yeah, it's been so busy."

He pointed to his food. "I had to start already. Sorry about that. To be honest, I didn't totally expect you to show up."

"I'm sorry for being late," she said.

"No, believe me, I get it. You need to handle the Monday flow. The customers expect it. Lunch is pretty secondary."

"I have to say, I've felt bad about the end of our conversation that night. Sorry about Annie."

"Did you guys actually make out? I tried to find a spot where I could watch from, but—"

"No."

"I thought if I climbed a tree—"

"No. No. That's just Annie. She's an idiot."

"She's an idiot who happens to be in the top one percent of people here. I wish I was that kind of idiot."

"You were talking about when you were a kid."

"God. Can I blame it on the wine?"

"You don't have to tell me anything."

Mae felt terrible, already knowing what she did, hoping he would tell her, so she could take the previous, secondhand, version of his story and write over it with the version directly from him.

"No, it's fine," he said. "I got to meet a lot of interesting adults who were paid by the government to care for me. It was awesome. What do you have left, ten minutes?"

"I have till one."

"Good. Eight more minutes then. Eat. I'll talk. But not about my childhood. You know enough. I assume Annie filled in the gory stuff. She likes to tell that story."

And so Mae tried to eat as much as she could as fast as she could, while Francis talked about a movie he'd seen the night before in the campus theater. Apparently the director had been there to present it and had answered questions afterward.

"The movie was about a woman who kills her husband and kids, and during the Q&A we find out this director's involved in this protracted custody battle with her own ex-husband. So we were all looking around, thinking, Is this lady working out some issues on-screen, or …"

Mae laughed, and then, remembering his own horrible childhood, she caught herself.

"It's fine," he said, knowing immediately why she'd paused. "I don't want you to think you have to tiptoe around me. It's been a long time, and if I didn't feel comfortable in this territory, I wouldn't be working on ChildTrack."

"Well, still. I'm sorry. I'm bad at knowing what to say. But so the project is going well? How close are you to—"

"You're still so off-balance! I like that," Francis said.

"You like a woman who's off-balance."

"Especially in my presence. I want you on your toes, off-balance, intimidated, handcuffed, and willing to prostrate yourself at my command."

Mae wanted to laugh, but found she couldn't.

Francis was staring at his plate. "Shit. Every time my brain parks the car neatly in the driveway, my mouth drives through the back of the garage. I'm sorry. I swear I'm working on this."

"It's fine. Tell me about …"

"ChildTrack." He looked up. "You really want to know?"

"I do."

"Because once you get me started, it'll make your Monday deluge look like a tinkle."

"We have five and a half minutes left."

"Okay, remember when they tried to do the implants in Denmark?"

Mae shook her head. She had some vague recollection of a terrible child abduction and murder—

Francis checked his watch, as if knowing that explaining Denmark would steal a minute from him. He sighed and started in: "So a couple years ago, the government of Denmark tried a program where they inserted chips in kids' wrists. It's easy, takes two seconds, it's medically sound, and instantly it works. Every parent knows where their kid is at all times. They limited it to under-fourteens, and at first, everyone's fine. The court challenges are dropped because there are so few objections, the polling is through the roof. The parents love it. I mean, *love* it. These are kids, and we'd do anything to keep them safe, right?"

Mae nodded, but suddenly remembered that this story ended horribly.

"But then seven kids go missing one day. The cops, the parents, think, Hey, no problem. We know where the kids are. They follow the chips, but when they get to the chips, all seven tracking to some parking lot, they find them all in a paper bag, all bloody. Just the chips."

"Now I remember." Mae felt sick.

"They find the bodies a week later, and by then the public is in a panic. Everyone's irrational. They think the chips *caused* the kidnapping, the murders, that somehow the chips provoked whoever did this, made the task more tempting."

"That was so horrible. That was the end of the chips."

"Yeah, but the reasoning was illogical. Especially here. We have, what, twelve thousand abductions a year? How many murders? The problem there was how shallow the chips were placed. Anyone can just cut it out of someone's wrist if they wanted to. Too easy. But the tests we're doing here—did you meet Sabine?"

"I did."

"Well, she's on the team. She won't tell you that, because she's doing some related stuff she can't talk about. But for this, she figured out a way to put a chip in the bone. And that makes all the difference."

"Oh shit. What bone?"

"Doesn't matter, I don't think. You're making a face."

Mae corrected her face, tried to look neutral.

"Sure, it's insane. I mean, some people freak out about chips in our heads, our bodies, but this thing is about as technologically advanced as a walkie-talkie. It doesn't do anything but tell you where something is. And they're everywhere already. Every other product you buy has one

of these chips. You buy a stereo, it has a chip. You buy a car, it's got a bunch of chips. Some companies put chips in food packaging, to make sure it's fresh when it gets to market. It's just a simple tracker. And if you embed it in bone, it stays there, and can't be seen with the naked eye—not like the wrist ones."

Mae put down her burrito. "Really in the bone?"

"Mae, think about a world where there could never again be a significant crime against a child. None possible. The second a kid's not where he's supposed to be, a massive alert goes off, and the kid can be tracked down immediately. *Everyone* can track her. All authorities know instantly she's missing, but they know exactly where she is. They can call the mom and say 'Hey, she just went to the mall,' or they can track down some molester in seconds. The only hope an abductor would have is to take a kid, run into the woods with her, do something and run off before the world descends upon him. But he would have about a minute and a half to do it."

"Or if they could jam the transmission from the chip."

"Sure, but who has that expertise? How many electronic-genius pedophiles are there? Very few, I'm guessing. So immediately you take all child abduction, rape, murder, and you reduce it by 99 percent. And the price is that the kids have a chip in their ankle. You want a living kid with a chip in his ankle, a kid who you know will grow up safe, a kid who can again run down to the park, ride his bike to school, all that?"

"You're about to say *or*."

"Right, or do you want a dead kid? Or years of worry every time your kid walks to the bus stop? I mean, we've polled parents worldwide, and after they get over the initial squeamishness, we get an 88 percent approval. Once they get it in their head that this is possible, we have them yelling at us, 'Why don't we already have this? When's it coming?' I mean, this will begin a new golden age for young people. An age without worry. Shit. Now you're late. Look."

He pointed to the clock. 1:02.

Mae ran.

The afternoon was relentless, and her score barely reached 93. By the end of the day, she was exhausted, and she turned to her second screen to find a message from Dan. *Got a second? Gina from CircleSocial was hoping to grab a few minutes with you.*

She wrote him back: *How about in fifteen? I have a handful of follow-ups to do, and haven't peed since noon*. This was the truth. She hadn't left her chair in three hours, and she also wanted to see if she could get the score above 93. She was sure this, her low aggregate, was why Dan wanted her to meet with Gina.

Dan wrote only, *Thank you Mae*, words that she turned over in her mind as she made her way to the bathroom. Was he thanking her for being available in fifteen minutes, or thanking her, grimly, for an unwanted level of hygienic intimacy?

Mae was almost at the bathroom door when she saw a man, in skinny green jeans and a snug long-sleeved shirt, standing in the hallway, under a tall narrow window, staring at his phone. Bathed in a blue-white light, he seemed to be waiting for instructions from his screen.

Mae went inside.

When she was finished, she opened the door to find the man in the same place, now looking out the window.

"You look lost," Mae said.

"Nah. Just figuring out something before, you know, heading upstairs. You work over here?"

"I do. I'm new. In CE."

"CE?"

"Customer Experience."

"Oh right. We used to just call it Customer Service."

"So I take it you're not new?"

"Me? No, no. I've been here a little while. Not so much in this building." He smiled and looked out the window, and with his face turned away, Mae took him in. His eyes were dark, his face oval, and his hair was grey, almost white, but he couldn't have been older than thirty. He was thin, sinewy, and his skinny jeans and tight long-sleeve jersey gave his silhouette the quick thick-thin brushstrokes of calligraphy.

He turned back to her, blinking, scoffing at himself and his poor manners. "Sorry. I'm Kalden."

"Kalden?"

"It's Tibetan," he said. "It means golden something. My parents always wanted to go to Tibet but never got closer than Hong Kong. And your name?"

"Mae," she said, and they shook hands. His handshake was sturdy but perfunctory. He'd been taught how to shake hands, Mae guessed, but had never seen the point.

"So you're not lost," Mae said, realizing she was expected back at her desk; she'd already been late once today.

Kalden sensed it. "Oh. You have to go. Can I walk you there? Just to see where you work?"

"Um," Mae said, now feeling very unsettled. "Sure." If she hadn't known better, and couldn't see the ID cord around his neck, she would have assumed Kalden, with his pointed but unfocused curiosity, was either someone who'd wandered off the street, or some kind of corporate spy. But she didn't know anything. She'd been at the Circle a week. This could be some sort of test. Or just an eccentric fellow Circler.

Mae led him back to her desk.

"It's very clean," he said.

"I know. I just started, remember."

"And I know some of the Wise Men like the Circle desks very tidy. You ever see those guys around here?"

"Who? The Wise Men?" Mae scoffed. "Not here. Not yet at least."

"Yeah, I guess not," Kalden said and crouched, his head at the level of Mae's shoulder. "Can I see what you do?"

"For my work?"

"Yeah. Can I watch? I mean, not if it makes you uncomfortable."

Mae paused. Everything and everyone else she'd experienced at the Circle hewed to a logical model, a rhythm, but Kalden was the anomaly. His rhythm was different, atonal and strange, but not unpleasant. His face was so open, his eyes liquid, gentle, unassuming, and he spoke so softly that any possibility of threat seemed remote.

"Sure. I guess," she said. "It's not so exciting, though."

"Maybe, maybe not."

And so he watched Mae answer requests. When she turned to him after every seemingly mundane part of her job, the screen danced brightly in his eyes, his face rapt—like he'd never seen anything more interesting in his life. At other moments, though, he seemed removed, seeing something she couldn't. He'd look at the screen but his eyes were seeing something deep within.

She continued, and he continued to ask occasional questions. “Now who was that?” “How often does that happen?” “Why did you respond in that way?”

He was close to her, far too close if he was a normal person with everyday ideas of personal space, but it was abundantly clear he was not this kind of person, a normal kind of person. As he watched the screen, and sometimes Mae’s fingers on the keyboard, his chin got ever-closer to her shoulder, his breath light but audible, his smell, a simple one of soap and banana shampoo, coming to her on the winds of his tiny exhalations. The whole experience was so odd that Mae laughed nervously every few seconds, not knowing what else to do. And then it was done. He cleared his throat and stood up.

“Well, I better head out,” he said. “I’ll just slip away. Don’t want to interrupt your pace here. I’ll see you around campus I’m sure.”

And he was gone.

Before Mae could unpack any of what just happened, a new face was beside her.

“Hi. I’m Gina. Dan said I’d be here?”

Mae nodded, though she didn’t remember anything about this. She looked at Gina, a woman a few years older than herself, hoping to remember something about her or this meeting. Gina’s eyes, black and heavy with eyeliner and moon-blue mascara, smiled at her, though Mae felt no warmth emanating from these eyes, or from Gina at all.

“Dan said this would be a good moment to set up all your socials. You got time?”

“Sure,” Mae said, though she had no time at all.

“I take it last week was too busy for you to set up your company social account? And I don’t think you’ve imported your old profile?”

Mae cursed herself. “I’m sorry. I’ve been pretty overwhelmed so far.”

Gina frowned.

Mae backtracked, masking her miscalculation with a laugh. “No, in a good way! But I haven’t had time yet to do extracurricular stuff.”

Gina tilted her head and cleared her throat theatrically. “That’s so interesting you put it that way,” she said, smiling, though she didn’t seem happy. “We actually see your profile, and the activity on it, as integral to your participation here. This is how your coworkers, even those on the other side of campus, know who you are. *Communication* is certainly not extracurricular, right?”

Now Mae was embarrassed. “Right,” she said. “Of course.”

“If you visit a coworker’s page and write something on the wall, that’s a *positive* thing. That’s an act of *community*. An act of *reaching out*. And of course I don’t have to tell you that this company exists because of the social media you consider *‘extracurricular.’* My understanding was that you used our social media tools before coming here?”

Mae was unsure what she could say to appease Gina. She’d been so busy at work, and didn’t want to seem distracted, so she’d delayed re-activating her social profile.

“I’m sorry,” Mae managed. “I didn’t mean to imply that it was extracurricular. I actually think it’s central. I was just getting acclimated here at work and wanted to focus on learning my new responsibilities.”

But Gina had hit a groove and would not be stopped until she’d finished her thought. “You realize that *community* and *communication* come from the same root word, *communis*, Latin for common, public, shared by all or many?”

Mae’s heart was hammering. “I’m very sorry, Gina. I fought to get a job here. I do know all this. I’m here because I believe in everything you said. I was just a bit crazed last week and

didn't get a chance to set it up."

"Okay. But just know, from now on, that being social, and being a presence on your profile and all related accounts—this is part of why you're here. We consider your online presence to be integral to your work here. It's all connected."

"I know. Again, I'm sorry to have misstated my feelings."

"Good. Okay, let's start by setting this up." Gina reached over Mae's divider and retrieved another screen, bigger than her second screen, which she quickly arranged and connected to Mae's computer.

"Okay. So your second screen will continue to be the way you'll stay in touch with your team. That will be exclusively for CE business. Your third screen is for your social participation, in the company Circle and your wider Circle. Does that make sense?"

"It does."

Mae watched Gina activate the screen, and felt a thrill. She'd never had such an elaborate arrangement before. Three screens for someone so low on the ladder! Only at the Circle.

"Okay, first I want to go back to your second screen," Gina said. "I don't think you've activated CircleSearch. Let's do that." An elaborate, three-dimensional map of the campus appeared. "This is pretty simple, and just allows you to find anyone on campus in case you need a face-to-face."

Gina pointed to a pulsing red dot.

"Here's you. You're red hot! I'm kidding." As if recognizing that might have been considered inappropriate, Gina quickly moved on. "Didn't you say you knew Annie? Let's type in her name." A blue dot appeared in the Old West. "She's in her office, surprise surprise. Annie is a machine."

Mae smiled. "She is."

"I'm so jealous you know her so well," Gina said, smiling but briefly and unconvincingly. "And over here you'll see a cool new app, which sort of gives us a history of the building every day. You can see when each staffer checked in every day, when they left the building. This gives us a really nice sense of the life of the company. This part you don't have to update yourself, of course. If you go to the pool, your ID automatically updates that on the feed. And outside of the movement, any additional commentary would be up to you, and of course would be encouraged."

"Commentary?" Mae asked.

"You know, like what you thought of lunch, a new feature at the gym, anything. Just basic ratings and likes and comments. Nothing out of the ordinary, and of course all input helps us do a better job at serving the Circle community. Now that commentary is done right here," she said, and revealed that every building and room could be clicked on, and within, she could add any comments about anything or anyone.

"So that's your second screen. It's about your coworkers, your team, and it's about finding people in the physical space. Now it's on to the really fun stuff. Screen three. This is where your main social and Zing feeds appear. I heard you weren't a Zing user?"

Mae admitted she hadn't been, but wanted to be.

"Great," Gina said. "So now you have a Zing account. I made up a name for you: MaeDay. Like the war holiday. Isn't that cool?"

Mae wasn't so sure about the name, and couldn't remember a holiday by that name.

"And I connected your Zing account with the total Circle community, so you just got 10,041 new followers! Pretty cool. In terms of your own zinging, we'd expect about ten or so a

day, but that's sort of a minimum. I'm sure you'll have more to say than that. Oh, and over here's your playlist. If you listen to music while you work, the feed automatically sends that playlist out to everyone else, and it goes into the collective playlist, which ranks the most-played songs in any given day, week, month. It has the top one hundred songs campuswide, but you can also slice it a thousand ways—top-played hip-hop, indie, country, anything. You'll get recommendations based on what you play, and what others with similar taste play—it's all cross-pollinating while you're working. Make sense?"

Mae nodded.

"Now, next to the Zing feed, you'll see the window for your primary social feed. You'll also see that we split it into two parts, the InnerCircle social feed, and your external social, that's your OuterCircle. Isn't that cute? You can merge them, but we find it helpful to see the two distinct feeds. But of course the OuterCircle is still in the Circle, right? Everything is. Make sense so far?"

Mae said it did.

"I can't believe you've been here a week without being on the main social feed. You're about to have your world rocked." Gina tapped Mae's screen and Mae's InnerCircle stream became a torrent of messages pouring down the monitor.

"See, you're getting all last week's stuff, too. That's why there's so many. Wow, you really missed a lot."

Mae followed the counter on the bottom of the screen, calculating all the messages sent to her from everyone else at the Circle. The counter paused at 1,200. Then 4,400. The numbers scrambled higher, stopping periodically but finally settling at 8,276.

"That was last week's messages? Eight thousand?"

"You can catch up," Gina said brightly. "Maybe even tonight. Now, let's open up your regular social account. We call it OuterCircle, but it's the same profile, same feed as you've had for years. Mind if I open it up?"

Mae didn't mind. She watched as her social profile, the one she'd first set up years ago, now appeared on her third screen, next to the InnerCircle feed. A cascade of messages and photos, a few hundred, filled the monitor.

"Okay, looks like you have some catching up to do here, too," Gina said. "A feast! Have fun."

"Thank you," Mae said. She tried to sound as excited as she could. She needed Gina to like her.

"Oh wait. One more thing. I should explain message hierarchy. Shit. I almost forgot message hierarchy. Dan would kill me. Okay, so you know that your first-screen CE responsibilities are paramount. We have to serve our customers with our full attention and our full hearts. So that's understood."

"It is."

"On your second screen, you might get messages from Dan and Jared, or Annie, or anyone directly supervising your work. Those messages inform the minute-to-minute quality of your service. So that would be your second priority. Clear?"

"Clear."

"The third screen is your social, Inner- and OuterCircle. But these messages aren't, like, superfluous. They're just as important as any other messages, but are prioritized third. And sometimes they're urgent. Keep an eye on the InnerCircle feed in particular, because that's where you'll hear about staff meetings, mandatory gatherings, and any breaking news. If there's

a Circle notice that's really pressing, that'll be marked in orange. Something extremely urgent will prompt a message on your phone, too. You keep that in view?" Mae nodded at her phone, resting just below the screens on her desk. "Good," Gina said. "So those are the priorities, with your fourth priority your own OuterCircle participation. Which is just as important as anything else, because we value your work-life balance, you know, the calibration between your online life here at the company and outside it. I hope that's clear. Is it?"

"It is."

"Good. So I think you're all set. Any questions?"

Mae said she was fine.

Gina's head tilted skeptically, indicating she knew that Mae actually had many questions still, but didn't want to ask them for fear of looking uninformed. Gina stood up, smiled, took a step back, but then stopped. "Crap. Forgot one more thing." She crouched next to Mae, typed for a few seconds, and a number appeared on the third screen, looking much like her aggregate CE score. It said: MAE HOLLAND: 10,328.

"This is your Participation Rank, PartiRank for short. Some people here call it the Popularity Rank, but it's not really that. It's just an algorithm-generated number that takes into account all your activity in the InnerCircle. Does that make sense?"

"I think so."

"It takes into account zings, exterior followers of your intra-company zings, comments on your zings, your comments on others' zings, your comments on other Circlers' profiles, your photos posted, attendance at Circle events, comments and photos posted about those events—basically it collects and celebrates all you do here. The most active Circlers are ranked highest of course. As you can see, your rank is low now, but that's because you're new and we just activated your social feed. But every time you post or comment or attend anything, that gets factored in, and you'll see your rank change accordingly. That's where the fun comes in. You post, you rise in the rankings. A bunch of people like your post, and you really shoot up. It moves all day. Cool?"

"Very," Mae said.

"We started you with a little boost—otherwise you'd be 10,411. And again, it's just for fun. You're not judged by your rank or anything. Some Circlers take it very seriously, of course, and we love it when people want to participate, but the rank is really just a fun way to see how your participation manifests itself vis-à-vis the overall Circle community. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Okay then. You know how to get hold of me."

And with that, Gina turned and left.

Mae opened the intra-company stream and began. She was determined to get through all the Inner and Outer feeds that night. There were company-wide notices about each day's menus, each day's weather, each day's words of the wise—last week's aphorisms were from MLK, Gandhi, Salk, Mother Teresa and Steve Jobs. There were notices about each day's campus visits: a pet adoption agency, a state senator, a Congressman from Tennessee, the director of Médecins Sans Frontières. Mae found out, with a sting of remorse, that she'd missed, that very morning, a visit from Muhammad Yunus, winner of the Nobel Prize. She plowed through the messages, every one, looking for anything she would have reasonably been expected to answer personally. There were surveys, at least fifty of them, gauging the Circlers' opinions on various company policies, on optimal dates for upcoming gatherings, interest groups, celebrations and holiday breaks. There were dozens of clubs soliciting members and notifying all of meetings: there were

cat-owner groups—at least ten—a few rabbit groups, six reptile groups, four of them adamantly snake-exclusive. Most of all, there were groups for dog-owners. She counted twenty-two, but was sure that wasn't all of them. One of the groups dedicated to the owners of very small dogs, Lucky Lapdogs, wanted to know how many people would join a weekend club for walks and hikes and support; Mae ignored this one. Then, realizing that ignoring it would only prompt a second, more urgent, message, she typed a message, explaining that she didn't have a dog. She was asked to sign a petition for more vegan options at lunch; she did. There were nine messages from various work-groups within the company, asking her to join their subCircles for more specific updates and information sharing. For now she joined the ones dedicated to crochet, soccer, and Hitchcock.

There seemed to be a hundred parents' groups—first-time parents, divorced parents, parents of autistic children, parents of Guatemalan adoptees, Ethiopian adoptees, Russian adoptees. There were seven improv comedy groups, nine swim teams—there had been an inter-staff meet last Wednesday, hundreds of swimmers participating, and a hundred messages were about the contest, who won, some glitch with the results, and how a mediator would be on campus to settle any lingering questions or grievances. There were visits, ten a day at least, from companies presenting innovative new products to the Circle. New fuel-efficient cars. New fair-trade sneakers. New locally sourced tennis rackets. There were meetings of every conceivable department—R&D, search, social, outreach, professional networking, philanthropic, ad sales, and with a plummeting of her stomach, Mae saw that she'd missed a meeting, deemed "pretty much mandatory" for all newbies. That had been last Thursday. Why hadn't anyone told her? *Well, stupid*, she answered herself. *They did tell you. Right here*.

"Shit," she said.

By ten p.m., she'd made her way through all the intra-company messages and alerts, and now turned to her own OuterCircle account. She hadn't visited in six days, and found 118 new notices from that day alone. She decided to plow through, newest to oldest. Most recently, one of her friends from college had posted a message about having the stomach flu, and a long thread followed, with friends making suggestions about remedies, some offering sympathy, some posting photos meant to cheer her up. Mae liked two of the photos, liked three of the comments, posted her own well wishes, and sent a link to a song, "Puking Sally," that she'd found. That prompted a new thread, 54 notices, about the song and the band that wrote it. One of the friends on the thread said he knew the bassist in the band, and then looped him into the conversation. The bassist, Damien Ghilotti, was in New Zealand, was a studio engineer now, but was happy to know that "Puking Sally" was still resonating with the flu-ridden. His post thrilled all involved, and another 129 notices appeared, everyone thrilled to hear from the actual bassist from the band, and by the end of the thread, Damien Ghilotti was invited to play a wedding, if he wanted, or visit Boulder, or Bath, or Gainesville, or St. Charles, Illinois, any time he happened to be passing through, and he would have a place to stay and a home-cooked meal. Upon the mention of St. Charles, someone asked if anyone from there had heard about Tim Jenkins, who was fighting in Afghanistan; they'd seen some mention of a kid from Illinois being shot to death by an Afghan insurgent posing as a police officer. Sixty messages later the respondents had determined that it was a different Tim Jenkins, this one from Rantoul, Illinois, not St. Charles. There was relief all around, but soon the thread had been overtaken by a multiparticipant debate about the efficacy of that war, U.S. foreign policy in general, whether or not we won in Vietnam or Grenada or even WWI, and the ability of the Afghans to self-govern, and the opium trade financing the insurgents, and the possibility of legalization of any and all illicit drugs in America

and Europe. Someone mentioned the usefulness of marijuana in alleviating glaucoma, and someone else mentioned it was helpful for those with MS, too, and then there was a frenetic exchange between three family members of MS patients, and Mae, feeling some darkness opening its wings within her, signed off.

Mae could no longer keep her eyes open. Though she'd only made it through three days of her social backlog, she shut down and made for the parking lot.