

## FOUR WHITE HORSES

One

An old woman in a gold suit emerged from the subway station at the corner of Henry and Clark. She was elegant—my *God* she was beautiful—with her well-adorned, bluing hands and her silken sleeves. Her ears sagged under the weight of two gold teardrops and a myriad of studs, the sort that would make Cleopatra green with envy. She had white hair, like the center of a fire, and it swayed while she walked on glittering pumps, and she was coming toward me.

I loved her instantly. That, I am certain of, as I stumbled down Henry Street toward the corner of Henry and Clark. I tried to quicken my step toward that beautiful, weathered woman, but it was no use. Everything kept falling. My right arm, which I grabbed in haste before the left hand could clatter to the ground as well, then my right leg below the knee, then, as I at last screwed my shin into position, my head, which went rolling toward the gutter so that my body would lurch for it, rooting blindly over the sidewalk until I felt the sparse patches of my gray hair or the sagging skin at my jaw. I would reattach my head, and then continue to stagger toward the woman in gold. The most beautiful woman in gold. If only I did not have a body that forgot to be a man.

It was difficult to see her, given my collapsible state, but I have lived a long, long time, and that sort of life teaches you to move by intangible things. Our eyes are liars, anyway. And so, I went down Henry, feeling around on the damp concrete for my fallen fingers and teeth, and feeling in the air, feeling upward for the sensation of warmth and morning time, the way she seemed to me. I lifted my tired arm from where it rolled beside an iron gate, my knees buckled, but I kept moving. I wrangled my right foot back onto my ankle with my left hand, I bent into the

bushes to collect a stray index finger, I held my nose to my face, just a little further now, just a little more as my right hand fell again.

The woman in gold gasped. She looked up at the gray sky through a frame of brownstones.

“Already?” she asked. She turned frantically back toward the subway. Her hair fluttered. But time was relentless, and the yellow tile of the station was flickering out, and no one was inside. The trains had stopped, as all clocks do eventually. She looked back at the street as it began to sweat, at the furrowed sky as it began to weep, its big gray eye shedding water down her golden suit. The fabric stuck to her in lumps, like foil.

“No, it can’t be time,” she said. Her great, cloud of hair slicked down into a translucent film across her purple scalp. Water ran the rivets of her wrinkles. “Not yet—God, *please*, not yet—”

She stumbled out towards the street, grabbing the streetlight to keep her upright, holding on with ten thin fingers as the wind howled. She was too old. Her steps were uneasy on the wet cement, and she didn’t trust herself to go forward. Her eyes roved wildly around at the shuttered cafes and upturned umbrellas. She could hardly see through the leaves that ripped toward her—the wingless bugs and soaked clumps of garbage and debris. She threw up a frail arm against the worsening storm. It did no good.

But when she saw me, she smiled through the uproar.

“Oh! Darling, it’s me!” she called in a husky voice. “You remember me, don’t you? I’ve missed you! Darling, it’s me, don’t you remember me?”

She seemed to know the words like she knew her name. Perhaps they were her name.

“What are you doing out in all this weather? Don’t you know better?” She stood with both hands clutching the traffic light. She was unable to move forward against the wind, but she looked at me and smiled, her eyes collapsed into crescents in her hollow cheeks. “You men, always so reckless! You’re lucky you have me here, you know.”

She could not help it, it seemed. Despite the ruin of her suit and her hair and despite the way that she came here, again and again, to an amalgamation of a man who had no memory to offer her, she was smiling.

“Bowtie is balloons underwater,” I mumbled. “Black cat comet fire! It’s not them, it’s not angel this and angel that unfortunate. Unfortunate. It’s and not and—”

“Now don’t you say that,” she called from the streetlight. She was the opposite of a shadow, a streak of gold clinging to its metal body. “I know you know me. I know you remember.”

“And but ran away the underwater umbrella under fire! Fire! Fire!” I said the words between the collapse of my tongue. No memory, no body, no language. It seemed I had only *her*—and the way I leaned toward her—to prove my humanity.

“Yes, yes, I know. But I promise you. I’m here, and it’s alright, and I’m going to take you home. I’ve missed you.”

I collected my tongue just long enough to yell, “Four white horses!” into the wind. I could only hope she caught the words. I did not want her to forget the sound of my voice so soon. She was beautiful, after all.

Because then, I felt the wind tugging at my knees, and a tooth went soaring off into the gutter, and I was soaked through my skeleton. I knew. I hoped she would understand.

My eyes were falling out, but at least she was there, up ahead. I lost my head again, but the sun was up, somewhere above all this wind and rain. My heart fell out of my chest and the rain drowned it on the sidewalk, but I stooped to collect it. I wanted to hold it one more time. To hear it as it gasped for air, ba-dum, swallowed water, ba-dum-dum-dum, went still.

When I at last collapsed, I fell to my knees-elbows-chin in an exhausted pile of myself. I was happy to at last let go of the long-held responsibility of keeping myself whole. The rain washed my hands and lips and heart away. I bobbed down the riverbed of Clark. Pieces of me, gurgling, strewn out and soft. I rushed wildly out to sea.

*My God, wasn't it splendid and odd to see such a woman in gold?* I thought, salted and sinking in the waves. *Wasn't it wonderful to meet her, if only just once? It was good. All this rain, but it was good.*

When the subway lights came back on, the woman in gold hobbled into the yellow station again. She followed the cracked corridor to the trains that ran and ran, as all clocks do for a while. She sat gingerly on a plastic seat, patted her damp suit, and gasped.

She was missing something.

Her hands patted the wet lining of her suit, the freckled skin of her collar, but they came up empty.

The wind must have done it.

It must have fallen loose during the storm, knocked free from where it rested within her ribs. It must have been swallowed up by waves of rain, left to bob down the riverbed of Clark, tugged away and sent rushing wildly out to sea.

She leaned her head against the subway car. She forced back the rain that threatened from just behind her eyes.

## Two

Juno was not the sort of person to believe in intuition, but at that point she had been sick for three months. It was a heavy cough. The sort that sat gluttonously in her chest and trumpeted out of her every few moments, interrupting her conversations, keeping her up long into the nights. It was irritating, but she hated it more for the way it reminded her, with every breath, that she was a hunch-backed, wrinkled woman. She was no longer young. The bad things lingered. This cough had made a home under her tired ribs and refused every eviction of chamomile, Dayquil, herbs, or hot showers that she tried. These days, things would not go.

When Juno woke up on that late September day, she coughed deeply, and a shudder ran through her whole, gnarled body. Nothing was working. The herbal mixture from Nina had given her slight indigestion and something like a sugar rush, that was all. Juno pushed back the cotton sheets and gingerly swung her feet over the bed.

*Perhaps it isn't so crazy, she thought, to listen to the horses from a dream.*

Of course, that was exactly the sort of thing Arjun would have done.

When they were young, on nights after they had gone out drinking and partying, Juno woke early and miserably to make herself coffee. She sat at the dining table, hunched over a mug, blinking mascara crust from her eyes. The newspaper on the table spun.

Later, Arjun thumped downstairs into the kitchen with whorls of black hair across his eyes and a severity to his brows that softened when he saw Juno. He paused to grin at her. He was wearing boxers that Juno could've sworn she'd thrown out.

"Morning beautiful," he said. He rushed to her and pressed his mouth to her lips and filled her gums with the stench of morning breath and day-old bourbon, and she wriggled away,

squealing, shoving his bare shoulders back from her. She would topple. He would catch. She was water and he was gravity and the world made sense when they were together like that.

“You know, it’s rude to dodge a kiss from your favorite one-night stand,” he said. The words were low and sleepy.

She scrunched her nose, “What makes you think you’re my—”, and he interrupted her, and she kissed him back.

“So, did you make me breakfast?” he asked. His dark eyes roving around the kitchen, his hand lingering on the back of her chair.

“Take a *wild* guess,” she said and reopened the paper, which she was still too nauseous to read.

“Hm. Did you eat?”

“It depends on what you mean,” she said, smiling at the paper she wasn’t reading. “Last night, I *devoured* my body weight in margaritas.”

“Right, and that counts,” he said. He put a hand on her shoulder.

“Definitely.”

Then, he would add something like, “Last night, do you remember if Whitney and Ralfie broke up or got engaged?”

“Oh, *they* got arrested,” Juno would say. “It was Tina who got married to the Monk.”

Or he would rub his forehead and say, “That whiskey was damn expensive, don’t you think?”

Juno would roll her eyes. “Yes, and now I’m feeling a damn expensive hangover.”

Or he would get this conspiratorial look in his eyes, lean toward her, and whisper, “So, do you think Rajan *lives* at The Canadian, or is he just sleeping with the bartender?”

“Well,” she would whisper back, “Can’t a man do it all?”

On mornings like those, Arjun made eggs and sat with Juno under the saffron window light. Inevitably, he would lean toward her and whisper something like, “You know, I dreamt about the three-headed kayaker again, and he told me that he lost all his money courting a tarot reader in Vegas...”

It was now very quiet when Juno went to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Her breath smelled stale, and nothing like bourbon. She pried apart the blinds, coaxed her stiff body into a gold shirt and a pair of jeans. She found her favorite bracelets, her boots with little gold flowers on the toes, her droopy earrings that waited patiently on the dresser.

Downstairs, she turned on a gas stove, and she hated it. She hated the egg white dripping down her fingers, she hated the smell of gas and yolk, she hated how she stood there, coughing, beside the trash bin. She hated that there was no voice in the kitchen for her to ignore. The eggs sizzled, demanded her, *come back and finish this*, and she hated that she did, with pepper and a spatula. She flipped the fried eggs, made her coffee, and pulled the single blue plate from the drying rack in the sink.

She had to think about the horses.

She coughed. She slid the eggs onto her plate.

Juno was a practical woman. She was not a sentimental woman. She was decidedly not the sort of person to interpret visions of horses. Arjun did that, in the mornings, while he gossiped and made jokes and fried their eggs.

But Juno had been sick for three months. And the horses had come in what was less of a dream, really, and more of a memory. But a memory of what? A premonition, then, that she needed four white horses to cure her cough. She couldn’t explain it any further—maybe the idea

came from sleep, maybe from her life. What was the difference anyway? She hardly trusted her own memories, but they were also all she had. She may as well trust this, too.

She ate her eggs and collected her coat and rushed out the door to find the horses, wherever they were.



Three

The sidewalk was damp with the beginnings of fall, and people moved down the streets in muddled swatches of neutral colors. Juno adjusted her scarf and set off down the street. Perhaps she would go to Central Park—that seemed like the place to find horses.

Coughing, she descended into the subway and took the two toward Columbus Circle. It was oddly crowded in her car, so she clung to a pole with a frail hand. *It's not so far*, she told herself as they lurched forward. She leaned against the metal, steadying herself, and then her eyes met those of the little boy sitting below her.

He jumped up.

“Here,” he said, offering his seat. He stood with his back as straight as a board. He had a buzz cut and a bow tie and a twinkle in his eye, as if Santa had died and come back in the shape of a chocolate-eyed boy.

“Oh, thank you,” Juno said. She coughed into her elbow and sat. Her achy bones thanked him profusely.

“That’s a bad cough,” the boy said. He swayed with the train, side to side, forward and back, but still his shoulders stayed impossibly straight.

Juno nodded. “Yes, it is.”

“You should take some medicine,” the boy chirped. He rubbed his nose with the back of his sleeve. His little yellow bow tie bobbed.

“I’m trying,” Juno said with a sigh. She didn’t want to talk to him, but something about his persistent commentary felt deeply familiar to her. She didn’t want him to leave. “Nothing seems to be working, though.”

“Really?” The boy asked. He itched his knee. “My medicines always work.”

“Well, you must have a good mother,” Juno said, smiling. She never understood children, but she wanted to. Perhaps if she had been different, perhaps if things had gone differently... well, anyway.

“Actually, it’s my grandma,” he said. He rubbed the side of his head; it seemed he would never stand still. “She fixes everything, she says that she is so old that she can fix time. Do you want to talk to her? I can ask her, maybe she can fix you, too.”

Juno coughed repeatedly, waving her hands.

“Oh, no, no, no, that’s very kind, but no, thank you.”

The boy shrugged. “Okay. What are you going to do, then?”

Juno’s eyes slid down the train car to the other passengers. She wondered what they thought of her as they sat there on their phones. Stoically eavesdropping, she was sure of it.

“I’m looking for white horses,” Juno said, almost defiantly. *Let them call me crazy*, she thought, *Good, let them think I’m a crazy old bat*.

“White horses?” As the train slowed, the little boy bounced around and rearranged himself around the newest passengers. “Why are you looking for those?”

“Well, I just...” She faltered. Coughed. Shook her head. She was not like Arjun. She did not have the vocabulary to speak on intuition. “I thought they might help.”

The boy cocked his head to the side. He looked off, thinking, with his small eyebrows knitting themselves together, and his pointer finger stroking his little chin. She smiled. Perhaps one of his parents showed him how to think like that.

*Oh, what would that have been like? To have another, smaller person in the world who moved like you? Who thought their own thoughts in a face that was like your own?*

“I think that’s smart,” the boy concluded, looking back down at Juno. “Grandma wouldn’t do that, but I like horses, so maybe I would do that too, if Grandma weren’t so bossy with her medicine. Are you going to find the horses in Central Park?”

Juno nodded.

“Good.” The boy was very serious.

“This is my stop,” he said, quickly. He adjusted his bow tie and looked out the window—only, the train was still moving. His tiny, straight shoulders turned toward the doors and, outside, the tunnel flying past. “I hope the horses fix you.”

The train still gave no sign of slowing, but he added, hurriedly, “And I hope you know how to braid, because I heard that some horses will fly you to the moon if you braid their hair.”

The train was still speeding through its black tunnel, but he walked straight up to the closed doors, took another step, and was gone. Vanished, like a little bowtie prophet. A few minutes later, the train slowed, but inside the car, all that was left of the boy was the echo of his words. *And I hope you know how to braid, because I heard that some horses will fly you to the moon if you braid their hair.*

Juno settled back against her seat, smiling despite herself. She pictured the horses—four white heads with snorting, black lips and big, bulging eyes, the peculiar smell of wet flies and trampled grass. The sense that their hair was spun from dew and woven down their backs in tresses like clouds.

She breathed in, but the train stunk like body odor with a faint whiff of urine. For now, she would content herself with this. The train rattled forward. She coughed, looking at the loafers of the man across from her. She bought a pair just like that—a beautiful, reddish brown—for Arjun on that Christmas they spent with their friends.

It was a collection of late-twenties, corporate couples who had put their dogs in crates for the night and spent Christmas dinner together at Tyler's loft under milky candlelight. The smell of roast and potatoes warmed the chilly night, the champagne giggled in their flutes, Arjun's arm sat snugly against Juno's waist while they ate. He wore his new loafers, and Juno looked like a fresh drop of snow in her white, satin dress. She had piled her red hair up into a delicate mountain on her head, like someone in a ballet. When she laughed, it was through a perfect smear of lipstick, and she loved to laugh at her friends' terrible jokes, knowing that Arjun was watching her. She was in love with that feeling—she sipped her champagne, nestled deeper into his shoulder, let him watch her laugh in all her easy beauty. She was so beautiful then. She was so young.

That was the party when Arjun drank too much, as usual, and she drank even more, as usual, and late into the night as they purred on the sofa with Christmas music and a new bottle of Cabernet, one of them murmured to Kathy, "Shhh, dya know we're gonna've a *baby*."

And Kathy whispered, "*Shut up*."

"Yeahhh."

"*Shut. Up. No way, no way!*"

And Juno pressed her wine-slick, red lips to Arjun's cheek, and Arjun giggled, nodding vehemently, and soon the whole party was toasting to a slurred notion of "*a baby, Juno 'n Arjun 'n a baby!*" and everyone would ask, for months after, "Juno, what about that baby?"

Juno coughed. The man with the loafers was gone, and this was her stop. She shuffled up and out of the train, onto the chattering bustle of the platform. She would not think about this now. It was all stupid, anyway, because what she and Arjun had *meant* to say was that they were *trying* for a baby, which was entirely different and implied a complicated and not definite

process, and anyway, it was nobody's business, anyway, except their own, and why did everyone have to ask so much, all the time, for months, and no! Her drinking habits had nothing to do with anything, and they had not gotten worse, and Arjun was... She did not want to think about it. She would only think of horses and braids.

With an upturned nose and a renewed urgency to her step, Juno began her walk toward Central Park.

The wind picked up, tugging at her jeans and the ends of her hair. She ignored it. She was looking for horses. She must have walked for an hour, maybe more, twisting through lawns of grass and resplendent, yellow trees, sniffing and coughing, stopping to catch her breath and watch the children play tag between the tree trunks.

The only horses she saw were two brown police horses, clomping down the road. They wouldn't meet her eyes.

Eventually, her lungs began to ache, and she settled onto a bench beside a streetlamp. The sun was high above her, pouring through the trees, and the wind had settled down.

She only meant to rest there for a moment.

Maybe it was the fresh air, maybe the murmur of families walking past, maybe the memory of Arjun taking her here for picnics in the early years, when they were young, when things were still so sweet, but Juno's chin sloped down onto her chest, her breathing slowed, and she fell asleep. Honey light cupped her cheek. It held her while she slept, knowing that there was no one else to do so.

When she woke, the sun had moved behind the clouds and the wind picked up again. She jumped at the sound of voices close by—a couple was sitting on the bench beside hers. They were wrapped up in each other like a human pretzel, dressed head to toe in white: white silk pants,

white boots, a white coat for the closer one, a white turtleneck and jacket for the other. The air around her was thick with the smell of pot.

The one in the turtleneck looked at her with twirling, green eyes.

“Sorry, you know, we can move if the smell bothers you,” he said. She said? Juno couldn’t be sure. They had a thin face and thin, wispy blonde hair that danced around them like a halo.

“Just say the word, and we’re gone,” the other added. Juno couldn’t determine their gender either—she wasn’t even certain of their humanity, in all that angel white. They scratched their dark hair into a fern-like explosion above their forehead. Reaching for the joint, they gave Juno a tight-lipped smile.

Juno waved her hand. “No, no, no, it’s fine. Of course.”

She looked out at the park, still a bit disoriented, then asked, “Do you two know where I can find four white horses?”

The green-eyed one looked at her curiously. They craned their thin neck around to look at her and asked, “What do you mean, white horses?”

The other pinched the green-eyed one on the cheek.

“No, Cori, she said *The White Horse*. She wants to know where *The White Horse* is.”

Juno’s eyes widened.

“Sure. Yes.”

She wasn’t sure what was real, anymore. The couple in white was now grinning at her with four stoned, sleepy eyes.

“Oh, *The White Horse*, duh,” said Cori. They leaned in, laying their cheek on the wild, dark hair of the other. “Card, should we take her?”

“Yes, yes, yes a thousand times.” The other, Card, was nodding, taking a hit of the blunt.

“We can take you. You’ll love it.”

“Oh yeah,” Cori said. “Everyone loves it. You know, that’s where we met, actually.”

“Oh, is it?” Juno looked back and forth between the two of them. Cori, with a narrow nose and red lips and a pair of thin brows that jumped up over deep-set, green eyes. Eyes that turned impossibly greener as red blood vessels began to show. And then the second, Card, whose broad shoulders were safely melting away into Cori’s sweater. Their dark hair leafing out in all directions, a feathered earring grazing their jaw, a thick, inky tattoo that peaked out under the collar of their coat. Card put the blunt to Cori’s lips, Cori took a drag, and the smoke billowed out into snakes.

“They were having a party called Vienna Ball,” Cori said, “So obviously, I was wearing this gorgeous sequined ball gown with these incredible four-inch Dorothy-red heels—”

“From Spirit Halloween—”

“—my favorite designer, of course, and oh, well, let’s see, I was doing coke—”

“So much coke that when you kissed my hand, you tried to snort the powdered sugar off my fingers—”

“Yes, but we didn’t meet then.” Cori kissed Card on the temple, and Card looked sidelong at Juno.

*God, they seem so young, she thought. Was it ever possible to be so young?*

“It was such a beautiful night,” Cori continued, “so I went outside, and the moon was just massive, and ugh! I went walking out onto the sidewalk—”

“Where I was, drinking a frozen margarita—”

“Yes, but I didn’t *know* that, wait a minute—”

Card was rolling the joint between their fingers thoughtfully, and Cori pulled their hair.

“Yow!”

“*Anyway*,” Cori went on. “All of the sudden, my phone starts going *crazy* because tickets had just gone on sale for my favorite singer, Concrete Pinky, so I start sprinting back inside and through the club, and I try to find Holly, who had my house keys, but Holly gave them to J.F.K.—”

“As in, Jacob Fucking Keegan—”

“And J.F.K. is at Twister, so I take a taxi to—”

“And anyway,” Card said, biting back their smile, “all this to say that Cori, in the process, left a shoe behind.”

“A beautiful, ruby-red, five-inch heel.”

“And *I* picked it up.” Card leaned back into Cori’s chest and the two made out passionately for a moment, their legs unwrapping and re-wrapping themselves around each other.

Juno shook her head. Yes, it was possible to be so resplendently young, and yes, she was like that too, once. When she and Arjun met, they were just like that—it was a balmy day at Coney Island and Arjun had his head in a trash can, puking up three hot dogs after a ride on Steeplechase. Juno turned to Nina, her best friend at the time, and giggled.

“Look at that idiot. Can’t keep his dogs down.”

Nina tried to look at her severely between giggles of her own. “*Ju-no*. Don’t be mean, that could be your *husband* you’re making fun of.”

When they bumped into each other later that day at the bar, Arjun asked Juno if he could buy her a drink. Before she could answer, Nina leaned over her beer and declared in a loud, drunk voice, “TOLD YOU SO!”



Juno smiled to herself. She remembered that feeling of self-absorption, that bursting awareness of her own humanity that everyone has when they are first loved. When they revel in their own capacity for loving someone else.

“Anyway,” Cori said eventually, extracting their lips from Card’s jaw. “Card found me at some point, I think the next week—”

“The next morning. At Astor’s brunch. Before either of us had slept.”

Cori smiled down at Card.

“And I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Cori purred.

“That’s a beautiful story,” Juno said. She coughed lightly.

“You know, you’re beautiful,” Card said suddenly. “It’s nice to meet you.”

They leaned forward, offering Juno the joint instead of their hand. Their eyes were kind, and Juno balked. *When was the last time anyone had told her something like that?* she thought quietly. She felt her cheeks begin to warm—it was a feeling she had forgotten.

“Oh, no, I don’t...” Juno laughed. “Not anymore.”

Card shrugged, taking the joint back and putting it to their lips. They tapped off the ash on Cori’s knee.

*Arjun*, she thought. *The day he died. That was the last day I was beautiful.*

She hadn’t heard him say it, not really—his voice was so weak, and his words were hardly coherent in those days, anyway. But she had known, when he looked up at her with those forgetting eyes. She had known that he couldn’t place her, he couldn’t remember anything, he was hardly *alive* let alone *himself*, but he had that look on his sweet, wrinkled face. He was calling her beautiful that day in the hospital. She had felt it.

Cori grinned.

“You know, that’s what I said when I fell in love with Card,” Cori said. “I said, ‘not anymore’ all the time. My old house, my old dive bar, my old fur coat that Card hated, my old name...”

“We changed our names the day we met,” Card explained. “Coriander and Cardamom, those are our names now, when we’re together.”

Juno leaned forward. She squinted at these two, white-draped creatures, wrapped up in smoke.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “Why would you change your names?”

They both looked at her, puzzled.

“Well,” Cori began. “a name is who you are.”

Card crushed the last of the joint below his boot and stood. They offered their hand to Cori, who took it.

“And right now, this is who we are,” Card said. They shrugged. “Some old lady—not you, different old lady, shorter one—anyway, she changed them for us, if that’s what you’re wondering. She knows so much about names that they say she names the storks that bring babies to be born.”

“It’s true,” Cori added. Then, they extended a hand to Juno, who was still sitting on the bench. “Shall we go to The White Horse, then?”

“Yes,” Juno said, but she hesitated. “But would you, just... let me make a call first.”

They nodded and went to a patch of trees to wait. Card wrapped their arms around Cori’s waist, Cori leaned back against a trunk, and they busied themselves with each other’s lips while Juno took out her phone. She coughed and brought the phone to her ear.

Four

“Nina?”

“Hm, hello, this is Nina Pecora speaking, who is this?”

“Nina,” Juno said, exasperated. “It’s me, Juno.”

She coughed a little for emphasis. Around her, the sky was lapsing into the first streaks of evening.

“Juno? Ju-*no*! Oh, silly me! You know, my daughter always insists that I have to pick up the phone and say, ‘hellothisisNinaPecoraspeakingwhoisthis?’ and now I guess I’m a trained dog. Oh, that girl. Anyway, isn’t that funny? Silly, silly me—you do know, I wasn’t always so stuffy like this.”

Juno smiled to herself. She pulled the corners of her coat up tighter around her chest.

“Oh, I know.”

“Juno, oh! Do you remember what I said when I saw Arjun again after all those years? All that time hearing *nothing* about him, and then all of the sudden, the three of us in that little diner, and all I could say was, ‘I knew you’d age better than her!’ Ha! My daughter would have had a fit!”

“And I just about killed you,” Juno chuckled.

“Oh, you knew it was true. He looked *good*, didn’t he? Always did. But I suppose you do too, as much as I hate to say it. I’m just being an ass, as my daughter likes to say, because the truth is you both have always, always, *always* looked good.”

“And so have you, darling.”

“Oh, shut up, you old bat.”

Juno looked out at the trees. She imagined Nina's dark hair, which she continued to consistently dye black even though they were deep into their seventies. She pictured Nina's hawkish eyes and her waxy, red lips, the way that she scattered herself through life like bullets from a shotgun.

"Nina?"

"Yes?"

"Do you, um..." Juno coughed.

"Juno, have you been taking my medicine? That cough, good Lord!"

"I have—"

"You better be. I'll come over there later and bring something more, God, Juno, you sound terrible! I can't have you dying on me just yet, you know. Funeral planning, me? Can you imagine? Ugh! I'll be over later with soup."

"I'm alright, really Nina. Relax, it's just a cough."

"Just a cough? Just a *cough*? Juno—"

"Nina, do you believe in anything?"

"Believe in anything?" Nina's voice cracked through the phone. "Juno, what on earth does that mean—"

"Do you believe in anything?" Juno repeated, rubbing her head. "Like fate, or God, or... I don't know, intuition. Have you ever believed in any of that?"

A pause, then, "Yes."

"Oh."

Juno looked out at where Cori was stroking the back of Card's head. They eclipsed each other, and the trees scattered them with shadows.

“I’ve always believed in stuff like that, Juno. But by now, God. Why not! I’ve seen enough, I’ll believe anything, I mean, the day I met Michael, the day my daughter was born, then my grandson, the day we graduated college, ha! Who would have thought! Oh, and the day with Arjun, at Coney Island—”

There was then the sound of movement on Nina’s end of the line, followed by muffled voices and footsteps.

“Oh! Manny, look at you, you’re all grown up! Come here and give Gram a kiss, now. Juno, Juno I’ll have to call you back, but I’m coming later! I love you, you old witch.”

“I love you too, Nina,” Juno said, and the phone went quiet.

She coughed. The air was humming with children’s voices and fat, lumbering bees. She turned to Card and Cori, because Nina was always right.

Five

“Aaaaaand, we’re off!” Cori said with a wink.

Card and Cori took her hands, one on either side of her, and they began to walk down the main road through Central Park. Their silk pants swished; their dreamy eyes were upturned. Juno felt particularly small between them. She straightened her shoulders.

“Isn’t it a bit early to go to a bar?” she asked.

“It’s five o’clock somewhere,” Cori hummed in response.

And then she became aware of how the world was darkening around them as they walked. They took a step, and the sky moved rapidly closer to dusk, they took another step, and the clouds bled a deep, wine-red. By the time they left the park and stood still at a streetlight, the sky was a hazy black and the buildings were dotted with lights.

“Card, fix your hair, you look ridiculous,” Cori said as they waited for the light to turn.

Card rolled their eyes. They pushed around a few coarse strands of hair, and then the light turned red, and they all began to walk again. Juno glanced up between coughs and watched the moon stride across the sky.

They stopped at a weary brick building. A sign for “The hite Hrse” hung above the door in flickering neon letters. Twenty-somethings in shimmers and black coats chattered and waited under a fire escape.

“Hi Willis,” Card said with a nod to the bouncer.

“Willy boy!” Cori crooned. “Look! We brought a guest.”

Willis was a short man with a figure like an upside-down triangle and long, jet black hair. His pants and jeans were all black, but his boots were bright orange. They matched the cigarette butts of the twenty-somethings waiting behind him.

He didn't speak, but his eyes blinked with acknowledgement toward Juno. He slid to the side to let them pass.

"Thank you, Willis," Card said, and ducked into the basement.

Juno followed, nodding at Willis. Cori pranced inside behind them both, adjusting the three chains above their turtleneck. They stage-whispered, "*We love you, Willis.*"

The noise of voices and stereo Lady Gaga was deafening. They walked through a beaded curtain, under a large construction ladder, past a pitch-black corridor ("Bathrooms," Card yelled back.), through swarms of red-lipped men and dazzling, pink-haired women, past thirteen high-top tables littered with cups and limes. They emerged into a humid room with low ceilings. There was a shabby bar in one corner, a wall of cracked mirrors on the other. The tables seemed to have come from estate sales, the lights were tinted a galactic blue, and there was a black cat walking across the bar. The patrons leaned over on each other's glittering arms. The bartender looked up at Card and Cori and brushed his green hair from his black eyes.

"Welcome, to The White Horse," Cori yelled. They released Juno dramatically into the room. Card twirled her, kissed her hand, then set her free in the narrow space between tables. There were less people in this room—it seemed that most had vanished into the various corridors that led to other, smaller rooms. Between the sweaty air and the blue lights, this room felt as though it were underwater. Juno coughed, but between heavy breaths, she smiled.

"Well, isn't this charming," she said.

A woman with a blunt bob and heavy eyeliner walked in behind them. She held an open, gold umbrella over her head. As she flounced into the room, an umbrella leaning on her collar, her eyes moved over Cori and Card and the bar, and they landed on Juno. She paused a foot or so away. Juno blinked up at her—the woman had to be over six feet tall.

“Did you forget yours?” she said.

She handed Juno the umbrella. “Here, take mine.”

“Oh, thank you,” Juno coughed. She smiled in bewilderment. The umbrella was heavy, but it rested gently on her shoulder.

*What on earth?* She wondered to herself, beginning to sweat. It was hot. And yet, she was happy. She couldn’t help but to look up at the umbrella and think how it glittered like a temple. “Thank you very much,” she said again.

“Of course.” The woman swayed away to the bar.

Across the room, near the mirror wall, Cori and Card had begun to dance. Juno eased herself into a stuffed chair nearby to watch, clutching her umbrella to her shoulder. She wheezed into the dank air. And yet, she did not feel so ill anymore.

Card and Cori weaved in and out of each other’s limbs with the grace of water in outer space. They were curving, slender figures in angel-white, their individuality forever unmade and reformed and blended away again as they danced with one another. Cori had a frozen margarita balanced in their pale left hand. Card had a beer.

*So this is what shooting stars look like when they stop for you,* Juno thought. She leaned back in her chair. Someone in a navy suit offered her a glass of wine, which she took. She imagined that the navy suit was Arjun—that he had slipped past Willis and found his way over broken glass and past the black cat and all the way to where she sat on a stained, lumpy chair. That he wasn’t upset anymore, that he loved her, that he remembered her, that he was wearing navy with his silver hair in the way that the sky wears navy with the silver moon. That he was alive.



When they were young, Juno left him in the smallest hours. The city was still mostly asleep, the sky was beginning to gray, and Arjun was snoring on the couch. They had been out late the night before. There were bottles across the counter, Juno's favorite necklace was in the sink. When she looked in the bathroom mirror, her cheeks looked hollow and completely drained of color. Of the night before, she didn't remember anything other than cigarettes and her own, raised voice when she and Arjun had fought over—

Nothing.

*Nothing?*

She didn't know. It was embarrassing now, that she didn't even remember the catalyst. There were so many arguments during those last few months.

"I understand, Juno," Nina said later. "You've been unhappy for so long. But be honest here, is it really Arjun's fault?"

Juno had told her to mind her own business. That morning her head was spinning while she packed. She hauled as much of her clothing as she could into two big suitcases, bagged her makeup, put on her favorite boots, and boarded the first available plane to Greensboro, North Carolina. At the baggage claim, she called her mother to tell her she was home.

"You're always so dramatic," Nina said over the phone. "Think about all the shit I'm going to have to pick up for you—your trinkets and shoes and jewelry and—oh! And all your goddamn China, you left that too, didn't you? Oh, for Christ's sake Juno. And how fucking long do you want me to hold onto all that? A month? More? Juno, baby, just come back."

But she couldn't. She and Arjun had been trying for a baby for five years. They had been engaged for three.

*And it never would have worked,* Juno told herself still, sipping on someone else's wine at The White Horse. *I never would have given him what he wanted.*

In hindsight, it wasn't that final night out that had broken her—it was the dinner before, with all their corporate friends and their Burberry coats at that Italian place in the West Village. It was the way Arjun picked up Brad's little girl. He spun her under bistro lights while she giggled uncontrollably—and then Brad took her home, and the rest of them went to a bar. No, it wasn't whatever argument she and Arjun had that night, it was the memory of Arjun grinning at Brad's little girl, and the sickening feeling Juno had as she watched.

"Why don't we just talk to someone?" Arjun had asked a long time ago, when he still asked her things like that. "Come on Juno, it's not a big deal—"

"To you, maybe," she had said through clenched teeth.

They drank that night.

On the plane home, she watched the world flicker in and out behind clouds, and she felt—if only for a moment—relief. This way, Arjun would remember her as the young, beautiful girl she was. Forever, she would be spinning under club lights and giggling over martini glasses and kissing him, giddily, in the mornings when the light was strong, and they had a lifetime yawning out in front of them. And he would not see her become anything else.

*If beauty is all my body is good for,* she thought the day she left, *Then I want it for myself.*

"Oh no!"

The woman with the bob was back. She crouched beside Juno with worry on her face. "Is it not working? I'm sorry, I just got it—it must not be a very good umbrella."

Juno looked at her in bewilderment.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She blinked. When had she begun to cry?

“Well, I just mean, it doesn’t seem to be stopping the water.” The woman reached under the umbrella and wiped Juno’s cheek. She smiled. “Oh, wow, you really have extraordinary eyes.”

“Oh.” Juno stared at her, this woman with a bird’s face and long, looping arms. The woman continued to smile. Dancers passed them, holding drinks and hands. Juno could only sit there and clutch the gold umbrella, letting the tears splatter down the front of her coat.

“Really. They’re quite, quite beautiful.” The woman with the bob reached down again and wiped up the last streaks of tears.

“Thank you,” Juno whispered. “That’s very kind.”

The woman with the bob stood. She blew Juno a kiss before flouncing away to the bar.

Juno held the umbrella tighter and coughed heavily against its handle. Her hand found the wine glass, raised it to her lips, and set it down as she bore another bout of coughing.

*Alright, Arjun, she thought. I hear you.*

When she left the bar, she took a final glance at where Cori and Card were leaning against the mirror wall, arms wrapped into scarves around each other. She hefted the umbrella higher over her head, and she remembered the weight of a love like theirs. The terror of letting your heart go—letting it live outside you in a fragile, temporary thing, and knowing that you may not see it again.

She had given it all up, of course. Packed up her two big suitcases and took her heart back, too, that bulbous, stuttering thing. But what good had it done her? She realized later that perhaps their love was not dependent on perfect calculations. That womanhood is not a mathematical sum of social currencies. That beauty is not young, drunk idolatry, but a gift that we give ourselves and others when we see them for everything they are.

Perhaps that was why, when she got a call from Arjun's brother nine years ago, she had picked up. Arjun was in a memory care facility in upstate New York. He had a wife, but she had passed away the year before. A few months earlier he had suffered a bad stroke that left him weak and uncharacteristically demanding, and he kept insisting afterward that he wanted to go to dinner with Juno. He wouldn't talk about anything else.

So, she went.

The first time, she brought Nina, but then she began to visit on her own, on the days when Arjun's daughter wasn't there. He didn't seem to recognize Juno on those later visits, but she didn't mind. She didn't care about something as faded as memory. She had Arjun.

And then, one night, he slipped away. And that heart of hers, which she had struggled so long to protect, went with him, easily.

Willis nodded to Juno as she left, and she took slow, purposeful strides through the chilly night. Umbrella in hand, arms heavy with wine, she coughed more deeply now. But she didn't mind. She floated homewards on a body that was wrinkled and cracking, and she didn't mind. It was hers. The night was a navy suit, and her beautiful body was hers.

Rain began to fall, lit by the gray-haired moon. Up ahead, she heard a little boy's voice, chattering away into the dark and emptying streets. The rain grew louder, and she held the woman's umbrella tightly, squaring her shoulders against the downpour.

*Alright, I hear you!* she thought, coughing into her elbow.

She followed the sound of the boy's broken sentences, taking sweeping steps down the sidewalk. She kept her head up. She thought about Arjun's face in the yolky hospital lights, his lips whispering odd words, his eyes eager—she thought about young love. She passed two men in reddish loafers, striding through the rain. The water poured down, down, *down* against her coat

and shoes. Juno walked. Yellow bow tie pasta was strewn on the curb, and its cardboard box had collapsed under the rain. A woman in heels and a white dress charged past Juno's left shoulder, a cat yowled, and up ahead, the boy began to sing. Juno walked. She could still feel Card and Cori's palms against her own, she could still hear Nina's voice in her ear, telling her, *I knew it all along*. Juno passed a spice store, a jeweler, a broken bottle of Cabernet, she wiped water from her face and smeared what was left of her lipstick, she thought about old love, the way it smelled. The umbrella tugged at her hands. When the light turned green, she walked.

All over, rain tumbled down on men who forgot to be men and on women who forgot to be women and on lovers, arm-in-arm with the ephemera they loved, and on Juno, who thought about all that falling water. She imagined relief and beauty and a window seat on a plane headed home. She coughed. Rain rolled down her cheeks as she put a hand to her heart.

Six

The woman was almost at the subway station when the rain stopped. I watched her from the flooded gutters. I was fascinated that such a gorgeous woman in such a grand coat would be out at this hour, in this weather.

She slowed her pace and looked up. She was outside of a large, brick hotel. A taxi splashed up to the curb beside her, and she walked onwards, her gold umbrella around her like a halo.

*My God, wasn't it splendid and odd to see such a woman in gold? I thought, salted and sinking in the waves. Wasn't it wonderful to meet her, if only just once? It was good. All this rain, but it was good.*

I watched a large family tumble out of the taxi. First, a weary father in a long coat. Then a pink-cheeked mother, three large suitcases, and four young girls with braided hair. The girls yawned and rubbed their eyes.

In their little hands, each held a stuffed white horse.

"Are we home?" one of the girls asked her mother.

"Oh, no, honey," the mother said. She rubbed her daughter's head. "But this is where we're staying tonight. Be good now, it's very late."

I rushed wildly out to sea.