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STEVE TOUTONGHI

**SOHO**

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*We've evolved not to see the truth but to hide the truth.  
The truth is too complicated. We don't need to know it.  
[This] gives us a fiction of causality.*

—Donald Hoffman

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*A new world*

*is only a new mind.*

*And the mind and the poem  
are all apiece.*

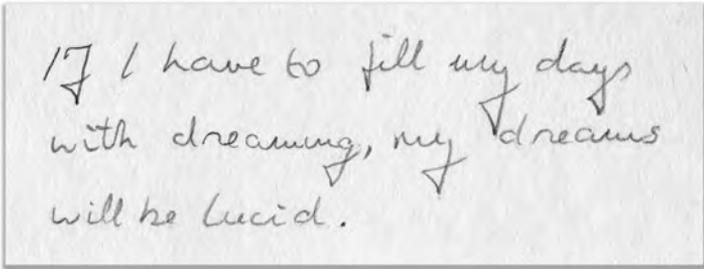
—William Carlos Williams, “To Daphne and Virginia”

Nerdean

PART

# CHAPTER 1

## The Axis on which It Turns



The man was defying traffic, striding slowly down the center of the merge lane that Vin and the line of cars behind him were waiting to use. The man was big and lean in a black T-shirt and black denim jeans, a long dark mane flaring like a sadhu's, a full beard softening his heavy jaw; and he looked preposterously confident, as if he were separate from the world and impervious, as if he were parting illusion. One lane over, cars flew by, their wakes gently tugging his long hair while he walked within two feet of Vin's new Tesla S and didn't even tilt his head to acknowledge the driver or the machine. Eyes forward, fixed on a vague middle distance, a derisive smile tightened the corners of his lips.

“Shithead,” Vin said under his breath, one hand poised on the horn. He began to ease into the merge lane but couldn’t stop watching the man, who was now stepping directly into the first lane of oncoming traffic. Cars slowed to negotiate a way around him but, incredibly, no one honked. Perhaps his riveting indifference silenced them; maybe he was violent; maybe he didn’t believe he could be hurt.

He strode across two more lanes to the concrete barrier. Vin was glancing in his mirrors now as he accelerated past the tangle of spring greenery erupting from the northeast slope of Queen Anne Hill. Before him was the clear span of the Aurora Bridge, its sides railed by a high suicide barrier. The man hopped onto the concrete median and swayed precariously toward southbound traffic.

“Shithead,” Vin said again, worry stabbing at him.

Yet his impulse to do something was already fading. Turning around would mean exiting, crossing under the bridge and driving back in the southbound lanes. And then what? There was no place to pull over. If he did find one, he would have to walk across express lanes to reach the man. And the man seemed altered, probably high. And Vin had already driven away.

HE PARKED WEST OF THE stained and stately Guild 45th Theater, a favorite holdout from the Seattle he’d grown up in. Over the last few years, as he was finishing his PhD and starting his company, Sigmoto, the region’s economic titans had been transforming the city, unleashing forces that sparked flaring skyscrapers and culled weak businesses. Running his own company had protected him from the arrogant beauty of new things; it was how he had fought feeling lost and small among the stone-footed pedestals and high shells of evening light. But

in the weeks since his ouster from Sigmoto he had begun to feel useless again, as if he had fashioned himself into a complex and intricate piece of living machinery, closely engineered for a now obsolete purpose.

His meeting with the guy who replaced him as CEO would be a courtesy, and Vin planned to keep it short. He was done volunteering information. It had been Vin's interest in climatology and statistical physics, his understanding of big data, his focus on user experience and his design insights that had birthed the first iteration of Sigmoto's "Decision Turbines" (an absurd but actually kind of descriptive name that his investors basically stuck him with). And it wasn't an exaggeration to say that he had probably been the only person capable of guiding the company to its true potential. Sigmoto should have been a new kind of data aggregator, forging the tools needed to finally bring shape and weight to opportunity costs—the options unchosen, the things that didn't happen. But after a slower than expected start, the board said they had diagnosed the company's problem and they removed him.

He passed a handful of twenty-somethings wearing lanyards with ID cards and swatting jokes and fragments of sentences at each other—"whatever they need"; "he's such a bozo"; "Stan's going to fire him." Vin picked a lane through their scrum and ignored the templated *bonhomie*.

Hiring and managing a team at Sigmoto may have been the first time in his life that he felt fluent in friendship. But while selling the product he'd also had to fight unnervingly poor execution by his technical hires, and he'd slowly come to see a painful truth: if Sigmoto's Decision Turbines hadn't existed, the world wouldn't have noticed. That realization punctured his self-confidence, and then, worn down by conflict with his

investors, he hadn't effectively resisted a "strategic pivot" toward gesture recognition. After that, all of his best ideas were off the roadmap and Sigmoto's potential was lost forever. So he didn't have a team anymore and he was feeling overwhelmed by the ambiguity and scope of his own ambition. But the challenge of motivation is only one part of the raw difficulty of doing something worthwhile. The answer is to work harder and smarter. It always is.

His phone started buzzing just before he reached for it. "Son!" His father, who smelled like sour white wine and described himself as a "Gaelic hustler," worked to make his voice a goad toward action. "I have a deal for you. Meet me for lunch at Fadó. I'm going to bring my friend, a very well-connected attorney by the name of Joaquin Brooks, who's looking for a house sitter." His father gave the name a conspicuous flourish. He wanted something from Joaquin Brooks.

"Why?"

"You don't have an income. You shouldn't be paying rent."

"I'm doing fine."

"Look, I didn't mind helping when you were building something."

Vin had asked his father for help with seed funding, to get Sigmoto off the ground, but his father had done nothing. Then, after Vin raised enough money to get started, his father had introduced him to two bankers, one of whom eventually helped out. After that, his father acted as though he had personally saved Vin from disaster.

"Okay, so you're young," his father was saying, "you were a bit too reckless. No surprise. But now you don't have a job anymore, so you have to move on. You have a chance to start again. And to focus this time."

“That’s what I’m already doing.”

“Meet us at noon, at Fadó. Or will you be gardening?” Vin’s mother loved gardening. After a bitter divorce, his father started using it as shorthand for a low-priority activity.

“Gardening improves quality of life.”

“You can worry about quality of life when you’re dead.”

THE NEW CEO DIDN’T ASK many questions. Instead, he avowed enormous respect for Vin’s technical vision and skill, and offered to reach out to his own contacts on Vin’s behalf. Within moments of their morning glory muffins arriving, Vin found himself describing his hopes for Sigmoto with a sloppy passion that embarrassed him even as it unshackled an ache in his gut. The guy changed the subject and started talking about other “interesting projects” in their “formative stages.” But Vin knew he could find a job. People were in awe of what he could do. He got off a few decent barbs about rudderless, generic “innovation” (he used air quotes), without impugning anything specific. The guy listened calmly and replied with a grounded sympathy that made Vin feel ludicrous.

The morning was faded and blustery by the time he recrossed the Aurora Bridge. He was distracted by the odd wobble of a hunched and hairy man standing on the other side of a swiftly approaching bus stop. Despite the serrated chill, the man appeared to be wearing only black jeans and a T-shirt. Vin slowed his Tesla. The guy was rocking, nearly pitching forward from his spot on the curb. Beneath a thick beard, his jaw moved as if he were chewing air. It was the same man who had been jamming up northbound traffic only an hour earlier.

He punched the Tesla’s control screen and told his phone to call 911. When a dispatcher answered, Vin got worked up

by the possibility that the man might tip himself into the busy street and he started to yell. The dispatcher was patient. She needed more information about where exactly the man was standing. Vin calmed himself and told her where the bus stop was. He told her that the man had been crossing traffic only an hour earlier as if he were Moses parting the Red Sea. Only this Moses hadn't been leading anyone out of bondage but just might wreck cars and kill innocent people because he wanted to part the goddamn Red Sea for no good reason when he didn't have a safe way to do it. The dispatcher still didn't understand where the man was. Vin concentrated on clearing his anger and answering her questions.

AT THE LUNCH WITH HIS father, Joaquin Brooks offered Vin a house-sitting job for at least a few months, but possibly much longer. The house had been custom built to the exacting specifications of a client, a woman named "Nerdean" (no last name), and Joaquin said it was worth a visit even if he didn't want the job. That evening, Vin arranged to meet his friend, Bill Badgerman, at a Caffé Vita near the house and they walked over together.

Bill showed up late, per usual, and wanted to hang out first and "decompress." While Bill downed two macchiatos, Vin got excited explaining what had been lost when he left Sigmoto and he accidentally backhanded his twelve-ounce triple latte. A barista rolled out a bucket and mop to clean up while Vin was throwing paper napkins on the floor in an attempt to help. After the barista fended him off, Vin took the last quarter inch of unused paper towels from the counter and dropped them into the compost, then wiped his hands on his jeans and joined Bill outside.

“Why did you do that?” Bill asked.

“What? It was an accident.” He didn’t want to defend the spill, but he would if Bill was going to make a big deal out of it.

“Why did you throw away what was left of the paper towels? Those were perfectly good.”

“Oh. I guess the spill seemed important enough to use the whole pile.”

“It wasn’t, man. That was just you.” Bill seemed annoyed at being embarrassed in front of a new barista, Charlotte, whom he’d been trying to flirt with. Bill and Vin had been friends since third grade and though Bill could be painfully shy, he was always thinking about women.

Vin was slimmer than Bill, his shoulders narrower, his skin a little darker. Vin’s mother was the reedy youngest daughter of a dermatologist from a village in Gujarat. Bill knew nothing about his own biological parents, beyond the fact that his mother was Native American and had given him and his sister up for adoption. He was narrow eyed, with jet-black hair and broad, muscled shoulders. He asked, “You going to see Beth later?” as they started walking toward the house.

“No. Like I told you earlier, she doesn’t want to see me anymore.”

“I guess I don’t remember. If you did tell me.” Bill was dragging the pace, showing he wasn’t fully placated on the subject of the spill.

Vin said, “You know, I think about her every once in a while,” and regretted it right away when he saw Bill’s fractional wince. His own pulse jumped.

Bill said, “Who do you mean?” Pretending he didn’t understand. Vin changed the subject.

TOURIST LITERATURE OFTEN DESCRIBES SEATTLE as a “city of seven hills,” entertaining the notion that the city’s geography connects it to a magisterial if somewhat dilute international tradition whose archetype is Imperial Rome. Vin knew contemporary Seattle had more than seven large hills and that there was some debate about which were the main seven, but he believed that every list would include Queen Anne Hill, whose southern slope defined the northern edge of downtown and provided iconic views of the Space Needle in the foreground and the misty prominence of Mount Rainier’s volcanic cone behind. They found the huge house snuggled into the western slope of Queen Anne Hill, beneath the lookout benches at Marshall Park and facing Puget Sound. The house’s exterior was armored in broad rectilinear panels of aluminum and teak. Inside, three stories were stacked above a half-basement, all in cool creams and schist-textured grays; aluminum plating was embedded in the walls as if it were hanging art.

“It’s almost eerie, man.” Bill strutted in and quickly left Vin behind as he circulated through the open rooms of the first floor, including the big modern kitchen, separated from an expansive dining area by a generous island counter. Except for a single card table near the island and four small folding chairs, the dining room’s golden hardwood floors were unburdened by furnishings. On the west side of the room, a wall-to-wall picture window framed a full view of the evening sunset as it spread its deep orange glow over the islands and water.

Vin followed as Bill, straight-backed and with his chest pushing forward like a pigeon’s, circled the first floor before inspecting the refrigerator. Vin had always thought the rigid way Bill held himself wasn’t just cocky but also had a kind of

showy rectitude. It was Bill serving notice that he'd make his own choices.

Bill slid the crisper drawer closed. "No food. There's not even carrots. There's a beer though. One. Guess you don't get one."

Vin said he was going to check upstairs, which was also unusually uncluttered. The second floor had three large, empty bedrooms and a shared bathroom. There were a few bits here and there, a brush with the sales tag still glued to it, a couple of cheap pens in one empty bedroom and a chewed paperback titled *Life in a Medieval Castle* in another. On the third floor, the spacious master bedroom held a queen-size bed, tightly made up with crisp white sheets and two thin, rust colored blankets. A black, cheap looking media cabinet supported a sixty-inch TV with a blizzard of connected devices—a PlayStation, at least one Xbox, an ancient Wii, a Switch, a couple of ancient TiVo-branded boxes, an Apple TV, a cable box, a Chromecast, an Amazon Fire, a satellite box, and some other things Vin didn't recognize. All of the devices were on, various LED lights signaling oblivious electronic commotion. A remote control with a touchscreen rested on the cabinet. Vin thought, there's your artificial intelligence.

Back downstairs, Bill was gazing out the picture window while finishing off the beer. "This place is a mansion." He glanced over his shoulder at Vin. The waters of Puget Sound were beginning to purple. "With this view, you're actually obligated to party. Regularly. It's almost as if you really made a bunch of money with your company." He laughed at his own joke, the "heh heh" laugh. "It's like you bought yourself a dream home. Oh, sorry man."

"Yeah. I'm house-sitting. I'm a house sitter."

"You said they didn't know when she was coming back, right?"

“No. I don’t think they even know where she is.”

“See. You could lose all this anytime, maybe next week if you’re really unlucky. And you have been. So you’ve got to get started.”

Bill thumped up the staircase. Vin sat in one of the folding chairs beside the card table. Sitting made the huge room feel even bigger.

“I thought she was supposed to be a genius,” Bill called down the staircase awhile later, as final light bled up from behind the mountains and the sparks of the city wavered on cooling charcoal water.

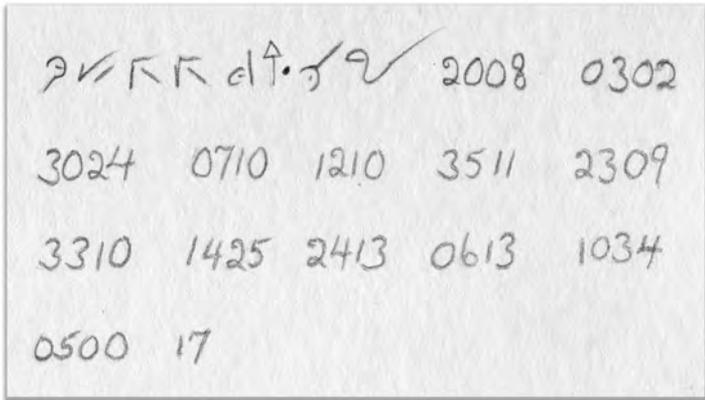
“She is,” Vin yelled.

“Well, why aren’t there any computers, anywhere?” Bill shouted.

And that was kind of interesting. No electronics other than the cluster of devices around the TV that Joaquin Brooks had said was supposed to stay on all the time. There were a handful of cups, bowls, and plates in the kitchen, a cheap set of flatware in one of the drawers. For a house she meant to come back to, this “Nerdean” sure had cleaned the place out.

# CHAPTER 2

## The Missing Girl



The electronics that were supposed to remain powered made the master bedroom feel inhabited. Rather than sleep there, Vin put an air mattress in a bedroom on the second floor.

After his second night in the house, the puzzling birdcall of the doorbell rang in the early morning. Vin, in khaki shorts and his brown “Faux Museum” T-shirt, found Joaquin Brooks standing on the white cement porch, a thick leather portfolio tucked under one arm.

“Good morning, Vin.” Joaquin was a heavy-set, middle-aged man about Vin’s height, with darker skin and short brown hair.

He was wearing a tan, impeccably tailored suit and black leather loafers with small tassels that looked soft despite their high shine. He smelled good. "May I come in?"

When they'd met, Vin hadn't talked much because he'd wanted to listen to Joaquin, who'd clearly spent a lot of time honing his speech. His lack of an accent was so pronounced it was almost a kind of accent, maybe a variant of Network English, which Vin had read about. Joaquin had the glowing bass of a news anchor and his unhurried, melodic cadences coaxed syllables apart in surprising ways. His diction should have sounded affected, primarily because he avoided contractions and used unusual constructions and "whom" rather than "who" for the objective case. It shouldn't have worked, but combined with his unusual inflections it did, and produced a calming, almost hypnotic effect.

Vin stepped aside and Joaquin nodded as he passed. They sat on the flimsy plastic chairs at the card table.

"So, how are you finding the place, now that you have had a little time to settle in?" Joaquin asked.

"It's beautiful."

"And, do you believe you will be willing to stay?"

"I like it." Vin nodded.

"Oh, I am very pleased. Of course, as I once mentioned, you can bring in a few pieces of your own furniture. Or purchase one or two new pieces. Nothing too elaborate, but I can provide a small expense account. I will appreciate your consideration of reasonable limits."

"Thanks. I'm okay right now though. I kind of like the openness."

"I see."

"And that great view is like furniture too, in a way, isn't it?"

“Is it?”

“And we’re not sure when she’s coming back, right? Maybe she should find it the way she left it.”

“I see. I appreciate that, Vin, but Nerdean has given no indication that she will return at any specific time. Frankly, I consider it a possibility that she may not ever be back. I believe that if she does return, it will not be for a long while. At least a few more months.”

“Yeah. This place has so many curious things like that attached to it. When will she come back? Where has she gone? I like that.”

Joaquin’s smile was almost condescending. Vin said, “You said that she didn’t want you to install an alarm system?”

“No. That is correct. Of course, that was why I felt that it would be very important to find a house sitter, after the break-in that occurred next door.” Joaquin was a rendering of the human male as a shiny object, whole and separate from his environment, with no intimation of what might be happening in the spaces within. Vin almost felt sorry for what he was about to do, for touching Joaquin’s smooth surface and causing ripples.

“Well, I think I may know something about that.”

“Oh?”

“I think she didn’t want a house sitter because she didn’t want anyone looking at the electrical system. That might also be why she didn’t want you to install an alarm.”

“Really? Why do you imagine that she would be concerned about the electrical system?”

“You’ve been upstairs, right? And you’ve seen all those devices connected to the television?”

“Yes, of course. Though she left clear instructions that I should not stay in the house, I have walked through it regularly.

She contracted for an ongoing measure of my attention. It will be a relief to have you here. I will not need to be quite as diligent about my visits. But yes, the television is—

“Elaborate?”

“Yes.” A brief and pinched smile of annoyance at the interruption. “Precisely, thank you. And she did not impress me as a person with an interest in movies and other such things. She seemed very focused, very active. I have not met her in person. I assume she is a bit awkward, a bit unusual.”

“I think you’re right, that she’s not interested in any of those things. None of those devices are actually doing anything. They’re all modified, controlled by a system that just blinks their LEDs.”

“Oh?” Joaquin set his portfolio flat on the table and folded his hands on top of it. “Well, I am surprised.”

“I don’t think you are. You don’t really seem surprised.”

Joaquin’s gaze intensified for a moment but he relaxed quickly. “I am. Why do you believe she might leave things in that state?”

“For the electricity, obviously. You pay the bills, right? I found the meter and it’s running pretty fast. She wanted to give you an easy explanation for the high bills.” Joaquin examined and refolded his hands as he patiently listened to what Vin was saying. “I don’t think she expected you to figure it out. I mean, even if all those things were on all the time they wouldn’t use all that much electricity, so she was just betting you wouldn’t look into it.”

“No. I see. And I suppose she was right. I did not figure it out.”

“I think you did.”

Joaquin flattened his hands on his leather portfolio.

“And that’s really why you wanted a house sitter. Because there was no break-in next door.”

A pause, then, "You checked."

"Of course."

"And you found nothing, which does not greatly surprise me. There was no police report. Many crimes go unreported to protect property values, and the neighbor in question has plans to move soon."

"Well, I also talked with the neighbor."

Again, Joaquin offered Vin the annoyed half smile, this time followed by a curt nod. "I see. That is interesting because I was told there had been a break-in. You are very industrious for a house sitter."

"I'm an entrepreneur."

Joaquin inclined his head slightly.

Vin decided to ignore Joaquin's insistence on the now discredited break-in. "I think Nerdean actually chose this house because the neighborhood is safe. There's no real crime to speak of. There aren't break-ins. Every house is alarmed except this one. You chose me for an entirely different reason. You talked to my dad. You expected me to be industrious. You wanted me to look at that rigged pile of junk and get curious about why it was there."

"But, of course, I did not choose you. It was serendipity. Your father mentioned your situation to me. I thought we might be able to help each other."

"Well, you hired me."

From down the long slope of Queen Anne Hill, the deep, prolonged groan of a marine horn sounded. Joaquin waited for it to end.

"A gut decision. I always trust my gut."

"Why didn't you just tell me what was going on?"

"It is in my nature to be circumspect, a characteristic that has

often proven valuable. And, the terms of my employment also specifically state that if certain subjects arise, I must forbid any investigation of the systems in the home, including the electrical wiring. I can only discuss the conditions of my employment if I judge that avoiding the subject might create suspicion.”

“I’ve never heard of a contract like that.”

“Yes. My employment agreement is very unusual.”

“You still want me to stay?”

“Oh, yes. Oh, yes.”

ONE BY ONE, VIN’S DAYS in the house were flattened and lost. He bought his own wireless access point so he could get online without touching the other electronics. He bought a blender and established a diet of smoothies, until he got tired of them, followed by pizza, until he tired of it, followed by smoothies, then pizza, etc. He spent time walking about the neighborhood struggling with an aimless, incurious lassitude.

Activities meant to kill time—video games, porn, aimless Internet browsing, Twitter wars, 4Chan, whatever—were fundamentally irrelevant and therefore intensely boring. He joined in a few pranks to experience the “lulz,” but there was no satisfaction in it—torturing clueless bunnies who metaphorically stuck electrodes to their lubed craniums without any notion of the potential risks. It made him feel bent. It wasn’t a worthy use of his limited time in the universe.

Nerdean had obviously gone to a lot of trouble to keep her secrets hidden and, after encountering what he believed was an inflamed avarice beneath Joaquin’s brightly glazed crust, Vin thought he could understand why. At Kerry Park, a small overlook with an expansive prospect that included the Space Needle, the downtown skyline, Mount Rainier and Puget Sound, he

watched as wedding parties, teenagers, families and cliques of friends took in the breadth and reassuring stability of the view. He dozed in the soporific warmth of the mid-afternoon sun.

He sometimes tried to battle the sameness of the passing hours, but if he tried too hard he found himself thinking about his final months at Sigmoto, and all the mistakes that other people had made. His schedule began to shift as he woke in the wee hours and stayed awake later, poking around online or starting miscellaneous courses from the Internet schools that kept sprouting up like daisies. Bill asked about parties at the house, but Vin didn't want any encumbrance on his time. He didn't want to be involved in plans.

When this dreamlike waking life was punctuated by rare calls from family, he told them about the courses he had started. Whenever he began to relate what had gone wrong with the company, he could sense their attention wavering, at least until they could talk about themselves again. They didn't understand what he was going through. He sometimes yelled at them for their complete lack of sound structural thinking, and their incomprehension of what actually happened at Sigmoto. He didn't want to cut them off completely, but decided he had nothing meaningful to say to them. He finally accepted their diagnosis that he was depressed, but didn't feel like doing anything about it.

The puzzle of the house encroached with creeping inevitability on the regions of his boredom. While wanting to respect Nerdean's wish to remain hidden, he also began to do just a little bit of research online and, as finding information about her proved difficult, it started to feel like a game.

Nerdean had been an orphan and ward of the state. When she was sixteen she'd chosen her own name. She only had the

one name, as if she imagined herself a pop icon, or she wanted a break from her past. She had earned a master's degree in physics and then a dual PhD in neurosciences and molecular and cellular physiology, all in her early twenties. She apparently didn't like photographs; he couldn't find a single one. The most substantial single document he came across was a short profile on the blog of an intellectual property lawyer. By the time she turned twenty, Nerdean had made several million dollars by selling a handful of software patents to a licensing company that the blogger indignantly described as a patent troll.

She was also listed for a time as a staff member at a lab run by a large cancer research hospital. In the few years she worked there, the lab earned some press for research on suspended animation. But after generating a lot of excitement and securing significant funding, the lab went silent. The project leader, who had done a well-received TedX, stopped giving interviews. Descriptions of the work on suspended animation were removed from the lab's web pages.

In a more recent article about digital brain interfaces, a researcher at the University of Washington was quoted saying, "We had a short but fruitful consultation on the structural subtleties of the proisocortex with the ever elusive Nerdean."

And that was it, pretty much everything he could find despite many hours of searching. As days passed and he idly pondered those few morsels, Vin created his own portrait of who Nerdean was, a model with no image.

WHEN THE DOORBELL RANG, VIN finished what he was doing, running his palm over the final feet of dark low pile carpet in the basement, then tracing his index finger over the carpet's edge. He rocked back on his heels and picked up the needle-nose

pliers. It had taken him a long time to identify the sound, a recording of the Black-capped Chickadee's "Hey Sweetie" call, a single high note followed quickly by a lower note that fell off like a trailing syllable. The electronic Chickadee called again.

"What's going on, man?" When he opened the door, Bill was waving a small bag of bud. "Why'd you take so long?"

"I'm busy," Vin said. It was a warm evening and he was sweating. He pulled at his black T-shirt to unstick it from his chest.

"This place has to have AC," Bill said.

"She's here," Vin said.

"You've got a guest? Beth?"

"No, Nerdean. She's in this house, probably under it."

"Okaaay. She's under the house. Did you kill her?" Bill wiped at the hair flattened against his own forehead. He looked refreshed but his dark brown eyes were slightly glassy and maybe his pupils were a little dilated.

"No, I didn't kill her. What kind of person do you think I am?"

"Nice. We've known each other for forever but you still surprise me with the different ways you find to be offended. That was a joke. You were the one who said she was under the house."

"You know what I meant."

"How? How could I know what that means?" Bill was pushing into the foyer. "Jesus."

"This isn't a good time."

"Well, this is the time I'm here. Look at you. You're playing detective, obsessed with the missing girl."

"I'm not obsessed. You know how I get. I just started wondering why she left the house like this."

"Nerdean is a fake name, don't you think? A pseudonym? Maybe she's not a genius. She's probably a rich housewife,

married and living in Magnolia or Madison Park or somewhere, with three kids. This house was just a project she got bored with.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.”

“No, it doesn’t. But it’s still a lot more likely than that she’s under the house.”

Vin glanced outside as a brindler cat slipped from a low cluster of *Achlys Triphylla*, whose common name is “sweet after death” because when you crush the leaves they smell like vanilla. The cat fell on its side in the middle of the front walk and stared at him brassily. He shut the door, wanting to close off the cat. The door’s spring-loaded weights caught and guided it firmly and slowly into place.

He said, “Talking with you is like carrying air.”

“Okay. I don’t know what that means either. So, what are you doing?”

Before Bill had shown up at a random time with his pointless agenda, Vin had known exactly what he was going to do. As Bill waited for an answer, Vin looked at the sharp tips of the pliers he was holding and then looked at Bill’s face, Bill’s eyes. It wasn’t something he would ever think about, but the connections just lined up in front of him: his frustration, the tips of the pliers, Bill’s eyes.

Bill said, “Have you gotten any sleep in the last twenty-four hours?”

“I don’t think so.”

“My friend, you’re lucky I got tired of hanging out alone. By the way, you need to shave. You’re doing that obsessive thing. Okay, maybe it’s *almost* normal, and I get it, you found something interesting. But it just kind of looks like you might be losing it a little.”

“I’m fine. I’ve been looking for her.”

“She’s a grown rich woman. She can take care of herself. And you stink, too, man. Did you know that? Let’s smoke some of this. You can smoke a lot and then go to bed. You look like you need it. Then, when you wake up you can take a shower and shave and it’ll be a new day.”

Vin felt his head twitch involuntarily. The hand clutching the pliers was very tired. Maybe Bill was right. He walked past Bill and up the stairs to the kitchen, to the drawer where he kept a lighter.

Bill fell into one of the folding chairs. He lifted the little bag of pot and tapped a finger against it. “You have that same look you had sophomore year when you were crushing on Leana Rono and you didn’t want to talk about it.”

“You always say that.” Vin found the red plastic lighter and flipped it at Bill. It bounced off Bill’s wrist but he managed a flailing catch before it hit the floor.

Vin said, “I don’t even know what Nerdean looks like. I can’t find a picture of her.”

“Instagram?”

“No.”

“Well, I always say it because it’s always true. You only have one mode with women. You’re like, ah, ah, ah.” Bill rocked his head and body in a parody of wide-eyed lustful panic that was kind of funny, but only because Bill was funny. “So, what do you mean, she’s under the house? Do you mean, like, in a bunker?”

“No, forget it. I didn’t mean anything.”

“Really? It sounded like something.”

“It wasn’t.” Vin didn’t want to explain, but still, the angry way he barked at Bill surprised him. Bill made a face and raised a hand in mock defense.

“Okay. Don’t mind me. I’m just here to visit a friend.”

AFTER BILL LEFT, VIN'S MIND was buzzing. He slept a little but woke up stoned and ate two slices of cold pizza. He wanted to flip a crust into the garbage disposal rather than reach across the counter to lift the lid off the aluminum champagne bucket he was using for compost, but his stoned brain was stopping him. His stoned brain preferred that he follow the rules: food waste should go into the champagne bucket. He stared, trying to remember which task his other hand, the empty one, could get started on. He remembered that it should be flicking the switch that turned on the garbage disposal, but doing that wouldn't help him with the compost. He was stymied.

Then he imagined—saw in his mind's eye—one hand flicking on the disposal while the other was in it, getting shredded. He winced and felt a flood of fear and adrenaline that made his eyes water. Then a sentence appeared in huge, silver, 3-D letters inside his brain. The letters said, "It's in an appliance." Even though the letters hovered in non-space inside his brain, they cast a shadow.

He lowered himself to a squat, turned, and leaned back on the counter, the pizza crust forgotten. Slowly he folded over and lay on his side. He felt as though all of space and all of time were expanding out from where he was lying and at the epicenter of everything there stood a being that made his own existence irrelevant. He closed his eyes and tried to slow his judgering pulse. Eventually, he fell asleep.

HE DECIDED TO SEARCH INSIDE every electrical device, and began by unplugging and disassembling each of the boxes clustered around the TV, unscrewing or prying them open while

sitting amid a technician's debris field of Phillips and flat-head and Torx screwdrivers, pliers, hex keys and spudgers, all of various sizes and shapes. As he worked, he set out the internals of each gutted object until neat rows of tiny screws, plastic clips, black plastic boards, and foam heat pads striped the warm floor. Any of the devices could be hiding a wireless connection, which might control a switch.

He had stopped considering whether or not Nerdean might want this done. He told himself that it was important to find her. She might be in trouble.

After the first day of pulling things apart, he'd discovered nothing of note and everything in the master bedroom was dismantled. He slept fitfully but woke at a reasonable hour feeling refreshed. He decided to find what he was looking for before spending too much time reassembling devices. He removed the panels of fuse boxes, thermostats, and external metering boxes, opened and disassembled air exchangers, air quality detectors, and curtain automation engines.

He finished at around eight, and then spent a couple of hours putting some of the equipment back together. It was a warm night and with the air exchanger in pieces the bedroom sweltered.

The next morning, tired but still enthusiastic, he brewed a pot of coffee and got back to work. He dug into the doorbell, which had a particularly maddening security plate that snapped closed on his fingertips several times in a row. He finally defeated it with a rubber mallet, leaving it permanently bruised. He used the same mallet to pop open a panel that granted entry to plumbing and electronic control for the jetted bath attached to the master bedroom. He stripped portions of the baseboard to find and pull apart the hidden speakers for the built-in audio

system. To be thorough, he removed all the rest of the baseboards throughout the house.

Late in the evening of the third day of his project, he began to pay attention to a gnawing worry that he might have gone too far. There were now many pieces of many things scattered about the house. Despite a devotion to organization and systematic disassembly, he had begun to lose track of the fussy bits of devices, and even the location of some tools. He had also created a few inconvenient artifacts, such as a doorbell that remained mysteriously non-functional after reassembly. (He had killed the chickadee.)

He descended to the largest room in the basement, the only place in the house that wasn't too hot, and lay on the carpet in that dark, open space. He closed his eyes and considered the mess he'd made of the house.

This was how things had been with him since he was a kid. He could be productive, and very creative in the first flush of a project. He could imagine great things and see himself doing the nitty-gritty labor required to achieve them in vivid detail. But something always went wrong. It was as if a seam of chaos were part of the very substance of his ideas, present at the moment he conceived them. It grew within his plans, a tiny malevolent uncertainty that became a critical but unnoticed gap in logic and then spread into a network of cracks, expanding fissures of risk and negative consequence. Each of those crevices grew until they all became things in their own right, distractions that eventually overwhelmed him.

It was as if what was really wrong was something in him, as if he himself were the flaw in an otherwise functional system. He was a destructive self-reference, his life a liar's paradox of flesh and free will. Three days earlier he had had a perfectly good

situation as a house sitter in a custom mansion. And now he had destroyed the house.

He rolled onto his side, but that hurt his shoulder. The concrete under the carpet was inflexible, unforgiving, and the carpet was not thick. He rolled back and threw his arm forward in exasperation. His fingertip smashed into something.

He gasped and pulled back his hand and curled up around it, sucking in breath and waiting for the pain to ease, amazed at how much a single finger could generate. As he recovered, he sat up and slowly gathered himself and then stood, a rising excitement lifting him.

He found the room's light switch—he hadn't pulled apart the light switches in the basement yet—and turned on the light. He was looking for the thing that had hurt his finger, a small thing on the floor near the wall. But there was nothing on the floor of the room. He stared at the area where his finger had hit something. He might have been misremembering the sensation. His finger could have hit the wall.

But it hadn't. He turned the light back off and waited impatiently for his eyes to adjust. When they did, the dark carpet gave away nothing. He slowly walked into the room and then squatted and placed his palms near the wall and began to move his hands over the coarse carpet. Almost immediately he bumped into an elevated square, right at the edge of the wall. He couldn't see it, but it felt as though it was raised about two inches and was roughly an inch on each side. Its sides were metallic, smooth and cool. He was sure that it wasn't there when the light was on. He pressed on it but it didn't respond. Nothing happened.

He turned the light back on and traced the carpet along the edge of the wall. No sign of the elevated square. He turned the light off again and confirmed that the square had reappeared.

He sat cross-legged beside the wall, staring at the point where the square stood two inches above everything else, invisible in the darkness, and he laughed. He fell to his side laughing and stretched out again on the dark carpet in the cool room. He had found her. He was right. He laughed and laughed and laughed.

HE STILL DIDN'T KNOW HOW to reach her. The house had only begun to whisper to him, the floor had divulged one single secret; there was more to do; he would have to listen closely to hear what the house was saying. So—start from the beginning: anything worth defending was worth defending carefully. And any single mechanism that Nerdean used might be found accidentally. What if someone happened to walk into that dark room and, despite its size and inconvenient location, happened to hit that one raised piece of floor, just stumble on it? It wasn't enough to just hide it in the dark. There would also have to be a lock. To reduce the possibility of an accidental activation, Nerdean would have to install a second trigger.

He began to work through possibilities until he felt himself following a thing that felt like truth. She had used electricity to raise the tiny bit of carpet, so the easiest answer would be a switch inside the fuse box, which was in another room in the basement. The last two fuses in the box were both very large and not labeled, which seemed odd in a house of this caliber, but not too odd. People can get sloppy toward the end of large construction projects. And there was a tiny bit of residue on the plastic beside both of the switches, which might imply that labels had been peeled away.

He didn't want to flip unlabeled fuses. Nerdean had made an effort to mislead Joaquin about how the house was using

electricity. Flipping fuses might cut a critical connection and, if she was doing what he suspected, it might actually endanger her.

Of the two fuses, the top one was probably installed first. It would power equipment. The bottom one was probably installed after everything was already working. He'd been pacing as he considered the situation. He walked over to the box and before he was really sure what he was planning to do, he flipped off the bottom fuse.

He waited, frozen in the wake of what he had just done. It was possible—within the realm of possibility—that he had just killed her. But anyone could flip a fuse at any time. Would it really be his fault if her system were so poorly designed?

He walked into the large empty room where the light was off and stepped on the raised square of carpet, adrenaline making his foot shake. As he touched the square it retracted smoothly, sinking quickly until it was flush with the floor.

A moment later, there was a soft rustle from the center of the room as the edges of two pieces of carpet rubbed together. A square of floor about two-and-a-half-feet on each side rose with steady precision and light breathed up from below. Then one side swiveled higher until the panel was on edge. An open door. Vin stepped to the center of the room and looked down a long, bright, human-sized rabbit hole.

Several dull thuds sounded from upstairs, and a muffled shout. Vin had broken the doorbell and someone was battering on the door. He took a step away from the hole and stumbled back another step. He walked out of the room and looked up the stairs that led to portions of the house whose existential integrity hadn't been compromised.

Then he walked back into the room and stared down the

hole. Metal rungs lined one side of the chute. He could see the bottom, maybe fifteen feet below. What most concerned him was that the hole and the hatch that capped it were real.

Even though he had considered the possibility of something like this happening, he could not have prepared himself for its reality. A double-secret passage into the heart of Queen Anne Hill had quietly opened up in his basement. A thing that never happens had happened in his life.