

## The Office of Historical Corrections

Our office was tucked away in a back corridor of one of the city's labyrinth brutalist buildings, all beige concrete and rows of square windows. I had never minded DC's lingering architecture; I had been in college before I understood I was meant to find it ugly and not cozily utilitarian. But I had grown up with the architecture, grown up idealizing people who worked in buildings like mine, and besides, I liked to remember that the term *brutalism* came not from any aesthetic assessment, but from the French for "raw concrete." Since starting at the institute, I had formally corrected mistaken claims about the term's etymology seven times. Small corrections usually made me feel pitiful and pedantic, but I liked making that one, liked to think of us, not

what institute?

just the people in my office, but all of the city's remaining civil servants, as people trying to make something solid out of what raw material we had been given, liked to think that we were in the right setting to do our jobs.

Of course, as a field agent, I rarely spent a full day indoors. Often that freedom felt like a luxury, but it was June—not quite the worst of summer, but hot enough that walking my regular daily rounds left me flecked with sweat and constantly looking for excuses to go indoors. Some days I went into shops full of kitsch and corrected souvenirs with their dates wrong just to absorb the air-conditioning. After everything else, I would remember how often I had been bored at the beginning of that summer, how worried I was that our work had become inconsequential, how I had wondered whether I would ever again be a part of anything that mattered.

The vision for the Institute for Public History that summoned me from my former job as a history professor at GW had been grandiose. An ambitious freshman congresswoman demanded funding to put a public historian in every zip code in the country, a correction for what she called the contemporary crisis of truth. It was pitched as a new public works project for the intellectual class, so many of us lately busy driving cars and delivering groceries and completing tasks on demand to make ends meet. Government jobs would put all those degrees to work and be comparatively lucrative. The congresswoman envisioned a national network of fact-

checkers and historians, a friendly citizen army devoted to making the truth so accessible and appealing it could not be ignored. We had started as a research institute, loosely under the direction of the Library of Congress—an NIH for a different sort of public health crisis. We were the solution for decades of bad information and bad faith use of it. Our work was to protect the historical record, not to pick fights (guideline 1) or correct people's readings of current news (guideline 2).

The post-election energy that created us had stalled almost immediately; the former congresswoman was now a TV pundit. At the institute, we were only forty people total, twenty of us headquartered in DC. The reduced parameters of our mission often led people to assume we were overzealous tour guides or long-winded museum employees who had strayed from our home base. Some of my colleagues leaned into the misunderstanding: Bill circled monuments correcting tourists with their facts mixed up, sometimes just by reading them the placards they'd walked by; Sophie rarely worked beyond the Smithsonian grounds; Ed hung out in breweries all day, but he checked in each week with such a lengthy log of plausible corrections no one was sure whether he was a friendly and efficient drunk or a gifted writer of fictional dialogue.

I had been at IPH for four years then, and I wanted to take my charge seriously. To keep from falling into routine, I assigned myself a different DC neighborhood each

month. For June, I was in Capitol Hill, where shortly after correcting a tourist who thought the Rayburn Building was named after Gene Rayburn, I realized it was lunchtime. The block surrounding me was cluttered with restaurants that had puns for names and sold expensive comfort food from ostentatiously nostalgic chrome countertops; it all felt sinister and I had settled on pizza when I walked past a bakery, its pink awning reading CAKE EVERYDAY COUNT in loopy cursive that mimicked frosting. I hated the name—the attempt at a double entendre failing to properly be even a single entendre—but it was Daniel’s birthday, and I caught the towering cupcake trees in the window display, heaps of red and cocoa and gold. Cupcakes would seem light and full of options, I thought, and so I walked in and considered flavors before deciding cupcakes were wrong, a variety of cupcakes would say I was a child who could not make up her mind, or else invite him to imagine the opposite—me fully domesticated and walking triumphantly into a PTA meeting, as if that were the future I was waiting for him to offer me. I walked farther down the counter, past the wedding cakes, and the photorealistic DC landmark cakes, and the cakes carved into shoes and champagne bottles and cartoons, looking for something unobtrusive.

The correction was so minor that four-years-ago-me would have decided it wasn’t worth it. A display cake read JUNETEENTH! in red frosting, surrounded by red, white, and blue stars and fireworks. A flyer taped to the counter

above it encouraged patrons to consider ordering a Juneteenth cake early: *We all know about the Fourth of July!* the flyer said. *But why not start celebrating freedom a few weeks early and observe the anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation! Say it with cake!* One of the two young women behind the bakery counter was Black, but I could guess the bakery's owner wasn't. The neighborhood, the prices, the twee acoustic music drifting out of sleek speakers: I knew all of the song's words, but everything about the space said who it was for. My memories of celebrating Juneteenth in DC were my parents taking me to someone's backyard BBQ, eating banana pudding and peach cobbler and strawberry cake made with Jell-O mix; at not one of them had I seen a seventy-five-dollar bakery cake that could be carved into the shape of a designer handbag for an additional fee. The flyer's sales pitch—so much hanging on that *We all know*—was targeted not to the people who'd celebrated Juneteenth all along but to office managers who'd feel hectored into not missing a Black holiday or who just wanted an excuse for miscellaneous dessert.

"Excuse me," I said, my finger still resting on the countertop above the flyer. The young Black woman turned around.

"You want that cake?" she asked.

"No," I said. "Hi. I'm Cassie. I'm with the Institute for Public History."

The white woman turned around, but both women

looked at me without registering that the name meant anything.

“It’s not a big deal,” I said. “We don’t give orders or anything. We’re a public service. Like 311! But I thought you’d like to know that this flyer’s not quite correct. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued in September 1862. Juneteenth is celebrated nationally because it’s become a holiday for the whole diaspora, but it actually recognizes the date slaves in Texas learned they were free, which was in June 1865, after the end of the Civil War.”

“Mmkay,” said the white woman.

“I’m just going to leave a note. A tiny correction.”

I pulled out a corrections sticker—double holographed and printed, at considerable expense, with a raised seal; though easily mocked they were almost never properly duplicated. I typed the correction into the office’s one futuristic indulgence—the handheld printers we’d all been issued when we were first hired—and ran a sticker through it to print my text. I signed my name and the date, peeled it from its backing, and affixed it to the counter beside the flyer.

“There,” I said. “No biggie.”

I smiled and met both women’s eyes. We were not supposed to be aggressive in demanding people’s time—correct the misinformation as swiftly and politely as possible (guideline 3)—but we were supposed to make it clear we were available for further inquiry or a longer conversation if anyone

wanted to know more (guideline 5). We were supposed to be prepared to cite our sources (guideline 7).

“You gonna buy a cake?” said the Black woman. “Or you came in about the flyer?”

“Oh,” I said. “Yes. I’m kind of dating someone and it’s his birthday. I was trying to decide what kind of cake would be best. Or I don’t know, maybe cupcakes are better. Do you have any favorites?”

“Ma’am, if you show up for your man’s birthday with you and a cake and he complains about it, you’re not even kind of dating him anymore. It doesn’t matter the kind of cake.”

“You’re right,” I said. “Give me that one.”

I pointed at something labeled BLACKOUT CAKE. “Like an Oreo cookie without the cream” said the description. I could tell Daniel I had bought him the blackest cake in the store. The boxes were pink with whimsical phrases written in gold; I asked for the one with CAKE FOR DAYS on it. I would let him decide whether to make the dirty joke, or complain about the cultural appropriation of white-owned businesses, or go with the obvious Oreo commentary. I would leave out the bit about my correction. Daniel was a journalist, skeptical by both nature and training, and he found my work suspicious at best.

He wasn’t alone. Before I’d left GW for the institute, I had been on an upward trajectory, had been lucky. I could recite the academia warning speech I had been given and

was supposed to give promising students in return: you had to be willing to go anywhere, to leave anyone, to work for any paltry amount if you wanted to work in your field, and even then, there was probably no job, or no chance that out of a hundred PhDs who applied, you'd be the one to get it. But I had done just one year of a four-four visiting gig in the Midwest before landing a well-regarded tenure track job, a two-two job not just in a major city but in the city I was from. The DC of my childhood was gone, of course, whole swaths the city felt familiar now only because I remembered less of what they used to be, but it was still the only place I'd ever felt at home. Landing a good academic job here was serendipity bordering on magic in a market where "professor" increasingly meant teaching seven classes on four different campuses for no health insurance and below minimum wage.

I missed my students and colleagues after leaving, missed working on the manuscript that no one asked me about anymore—my years of research on Odetta Holmes still in file drawers. I missed the particular playacted pretension and permanent adolescence that characterized academic parties, and, I admit, I missed the ways that being near the top of a crumbling enterprise had still felt like the top. But, when the chance to work at IPH came, I'd left all of that to do what felt more immediately meaningful.

My parents had relished introducing me as Dr. Jacobs, the history professor, and now didn't quite know what to



say I was. I had tried to explain to them that *professor*, even in its best incarnation, now meant answering every year to the tyranny of metrics and enrollments, meant spinning what you loved because you loved it and valued because it was valuable into a language of corporate speak to convince administrators your students were employable. It meant being told you were the problem if you coddled students too much, you, the last chance to prepare them for the sink-or-swim world, but also you were the problem if the students were in crisis, if you didn't warn someone in time that a student was a danger to themselves, if you didn't have a plan for how to keep your classroom in the fifty-year-old building with doors that didn't lock anymore safe if a student with a gun showed up. It meant being told each year in a celebratory fashion that the faculty was now more diverse than ever, and then, at some more somber meeting a few months later, being given a list of all the acts of self-governance faculty would no longer be trusted to do and all the evaluative metrics that would now be considered more strictly. It meant being given well-intentioned useless advice from senior colleagues who floated in denial that the institutions they'd devoted their lives to were over as they had known them, but reminded by your more precarious colleagues that you had it too good to complain.

It had been hard for me to convince people—even the people at IPH itself, who had been mostly recruiting from the surplus of PhDs without full-time jobs—that I had

really wanted to leave. The best I could explain it was that I loved my work and hated watching it disappear.

THE INSTITUTE was not without its detractors. The proposal alone had incited a chorus of libertarian panic. In our first year, there were seventeen different social media accounts devoted just to monitoring our corrections; the accounts called us, depending on their angle of critique, The Big Brother Institute, or The Department of Political Correctness, or The Bureau of Whitewashing, or, once in a major paper's op-ed, The Office of Historical Corrections, which was intended to be dismissive but felt enough like our actual mission that it had become a running office joke, the imaginary shadow entity on which we blamed all missteps and bad publicity. *The Office of Historical Corrections strikes again!*

The attention economy was our nemesis and our cheapest tool. About half of the historians worked primarily online. Originally, each had a friendly profile with their name and picture and credentials, meant to make them accessible and unintimidating, but all three of the women of color complained that every time they made a correction their replies flooded with personal vitriol. They tried randomizing log-ins, so that each day's corrections were not necessarily linked to the agent who'd issued them, which pleased

no one: white men did not like being called ugly cunts any better than anyone else, it turned out, and the women of color who had complained in the first place did not like feeling uncredited for their labor, or appreciate the erasure of the professional voices they had cultivated. Everyone with a desk job now worked from a shared faceless account, which did, admittedly, look somewhat ominous and bureaucratic, but was generally cheerful in tone.

that's sad

We did the best we could. There was an agent primarily devoted to sending strongly worded letters to the publishers of inaccurate textbooks, but we did not go to schools and classrooms (guideline 4). Our purpose was limited to correction of the historical record, which our mission defined as events at least one year old (guideline 2, part b). We were to make every effort to avoid or back away from the kind of confrontation likely to escalate to force or police intervention (guideline 1). We were supposed to avoid meaningless and pedantic corrections (guideline 8), but the work attracted the pedantic. We had done a month of damage control after one of my more zealous colleagues publicly embarrassed a popular influencer over her pronunciation of "Ulysses" in a fashion vlog she'd posted from Grant's Tomb. The influencer dubbed us The Office of Mansplaining, which was picked up by at least a thousand of her million followers. I was one of three women of color who were field historians with the project at the time; in

the wake of the controversy, I had been sent by the director to be profiled in *The Post*, to show we were inclusive and nonthreatening.

The most persistent of our resistance came from the Free Americans, a group of white supremacists who preferred to be called white preservationists. Their leader had turned forty last year but was frequently described by the press as having boyish charm. He was soft-spoken and had a doctorate in psychology. He claimed to hate both violence and the spotlight, but he frequently appeared on television and at marches that turned into brawls. A few years earlier he'd been on the cover of a national magazine in a tailored suit and ascot, which had become such a joke that all members now wore ascots, though many continued to mark themselves by getting the same tattoo: an elk's head with FREE MEN FREE FISTS NO FREE LUNCHESES written between the antlers. Violence seemed to turn up where they did, but officially they were deemed responsible for only three deaths: an anarchist kid beaten after dueling protests, a Salvadoran man heckled and stabbed on his way home from work by a rowdy chapter leaving a bar, and a white college student shot and dumped into a lake after she argued with her boyfriend about his affiliation with the group. They had never physically attacked an IPH agent, though the Oakland field agent quit after an upsetting run-in. They staged protests against us, following a field historian around for the day, or papering over all of the corrections stickers

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in a given city with their own revisions, but they were more interested in the publicity than in us specifically, we'd realized, and when the press around us was quieter, mostly so were they.

**I MADE ONLY THREE CORRECTIONS** after the bakery, and then I circled the reflecting pool several times without hearing anything more incorrect than celebrity gossip and unscientific speculation about the mating habits of ducks. I suspected that under its ornamental and slightly profane box, my cake was melting, so I decided to bring it safely to the office refrigerator and use the rest of the afternoon to type up reports. In the lobby, I flashed my badge at the security guard and took the elevator to the seventh floor, where we had been shoved into an open office space that a different government agency had argued its way out of based on studies showing reduced efficiency.

I didn't mind the close quarters; I wasn't confined to my desk most of the time, and when I was there Elena was on the other side of it. We had started together at the beginning of the enterprise and bonded quickly: Elena worked online and I worked in the field; Elena was a Chicana from LA and I was a Black girl from DC; Elena had a husband and three kids and I had what Elena charitably called a free spirit, but we shared an urgency about the kind of work we were doing, a belief that the truth was our last best hope,

and a sense that our own mission was less neutral and more necessary than that of the white men we answered to at the office.

“What’s the cake for?” Elena asked.

“Daniel’s birthday,” I said.

“Hmm,” said Elena.

“What?”

“I guess it’s your turn to make the effort.”

“It’s not about effort. That’s the whole point of not really dating. It’s easy. No one has to make the effort.”

“Hold on, I’m writing down the date.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t correct you until a year from now. Guideline 2.”

“See, I almost brought you a cupcake, but then I remembered you’re mean.”

“You really didn’t bring me a cupcake?”

“I actually was going to, but I had to make a correction in the bakery, and I got flustered and forgot. Plus the girl who worked there already thought I was crazy.”

“You corrected a cake?”

“I corrected a flyer in a cake shop.”

“Well, boss wants to see you. He left a note.” Elena pointed to my desk. “Maybe don’t lead with the cake bit.”

I read the note, but it was inscrutable. I could not recall being involved in anything controversial lately—my recent corrections had been rather uniformly underwhelming—but

our supervision was so generally lax that I felt like I'd been called to the principal's office. The director had been running a prestigious university's ethnomusicology institute before he'd been invited to steer the organization. While he managed most days to look the DC part in suits and close-cropped hair, and he kept all the institute's moving pieces more or less moving, he had the energy of a man who had intended to spend his golden years playing guitar on the beach and was daily bewildered by what had gone wrong.

"Cassie," he said when I walked into his office. "We have a Genevieve problem. It might take some legwork to sort out."

He tapped a folder on his desk. A clarification request. The requests that made it past initial review were mostly cases where the historian's initial correction had been overzealous, frequently violations of guideline 6: we do not posit certainty where the facts are actually murky or disputed, or intervene in a dispute over something so trivial that the relevant information cannot be verified except by weighing the accounts of the disputing parties. Presently, though, the institute was working its way through a backlog of clarification requests all triggered by the recently departed Genevieve Marchand.

Genevieve had been gone from IPH for six months, but she had been regularly reappearing as my nemesis for most of my life. We first met in the fourth grade, when Genevieve was still Genie and had, until the moment of our

introduction, been the only Black girl in her class at the private school where I landed a scholarship. Our parents moved, broadly, in the same Black professional circles, but my father was a lawyer who had started with the Bureau of Consumer Protection and then moved into the sort of lawyering that advertised on the radio stations that were banned in Genie's home (*No Money? No Problems! At 1-800-TROUBLE your lawyer gets paid when you do*); Genie's mother was a sitting judge. My mother had recently moved from civil rights work in the Department of Justice to civil rights work in the Department of Education; Genie's father owned part of a tech company and had his name on a wing of our school. My parents were first-generation upper middle class, and Genie's were nearly as old money as Black money got to be in the U.S., which is to say, not terribly old but extremely proud of it.

My parents and I were invited over to their house after my first week of school. In the middle of the dessert course, Genie's father said, "She's so well spoken, for having been in public school until now," and my mother grimaced and launched into a defense of public schools, and my father politely waited for her to finish and then said, "When your baby's really brilliant you don't need to pay for someone to tell you so. You wait for the opportunities to come to you."

Genie's father hinted that my scholarship was possible because of funds they'd earmarked for the recruitment of minority students, and my mother said true charity wasn't



boastful, and Genie's mother noted that the Bible verse my mother was trying to quote was actually about love. That was how joint family dinners went for the following decade, but they continued to happen several times a year.

At the dinner table, Genie was a proper young lady and I was a mouthy child being raised in a home where I'd never been told *Children should be seen and not heard*, or *Stay out of grown folks' business*. Beyond our parents' watch, Genie had plenty to say. She did not so much actively dislike me as disdain me. Her favorite thing to do was pronounce something I was doing, or wearing, or simply was, to be confusing. "Your hair is confusing me," Genie said the first day we met, with an air of genuine concern that never entirely went away or became less grating. In both our households there were a series of party pictures of the two of us, one per party each year from childhood to adolescence. I liked myself just fine when looking at myself, but in photos with Genie, a former Gerber baby, belle of the Jack and Jill debutante ball, I looked sulky, ersatz. It was too late for the era when prestigious institutions would acquire one minority and stop, but too soon for there to be enough of us that we had the option of avoiding taking a position on each other. We grew up circling each other, each aware of the ways the other highlighted our deficiencies.

I went to college expecting to be mostly rid of Genie. For the four years we spent at well-regarded universities on opposite coasts, I became accustomed to her absence, but

at the party Genie's parents threw for her graduation, we discovered we were both headed directly to the same PhD program. Ready to believe in the comfort of the familiar, we tried that first year to be real friends, went on study dates and girls' nights and salon outings, built the trap-pings of a closeness that never quite took. We were the only two Black women in the department—this counting faculty, grad students, staff, and, for four out of our five years, undergraduate majors—and in our first year I was constantly correcting people who got the two of us confused, our similar hair and coloring enough to override that Genie was five inches taller and three dress sizes smaller than I was. The confusion eventually faded because professors in the program liked me fine, but they loved Genie, and in that way they came to be able to tell the difference between us. Our pretense at true friendship also faded. In my telling, Genie discovered she didn't need it, and in Genie's telling, I discovered I didn't want it. It was true, I admit—away from Genie, I had the peculiar confidence of only children, the boldness that came from being doted on but alone often enough to be oblivious to my own strangeness. In Genie's presence, I felt revealed by the only nearby witness to my life as a whole.

At the end of our first year in the program, I visited my parents, who were in the suburbs now—they had given up on DC rent and moved to PG county—and told them there wasn't anyone to date seriously in my small white univer-

sity town. A week later we drove into DC for Genie's parents' annual summer white party, where Genie announced her engagement to James Harmon III, a Black doctor who'd just finished his residency there. Genie got married the summer after our second year, just before her husband started work at the University Hospital. I was invited, but I was teaching a summer class and couldn't cancel sessions; I sent, via my parents, my apologies and a Vitamix. My research area was protest movements of the twentieth century, and Genie's was material culture in the seventeenth century, which meant although we were both Americanists, after our first year of school we generally shared only one class a semester, and saw less and less of each other.

By our third year, Genie and her husband had moved into a spectacular town house, at which she volunteered to host the annual grad student end-of-year party. In previous years, the party had consisted of chips and beer in an overheated basement apartment, or supermarket cheese plates in the student union room, but Genie's party was catered, except for the gingerbread Bundt cake she baked and iced herself, using her grandmother's recipe. Professional bartenders in black tie were on hand serving cocktails named after schools of historical thought. Genie drank only The Great Man, which was actually a mocktail, and confided in me that she was pregnant. I congratulated her, genuinely, and felt resentful that I could not allow myself even a moment of smug anti-feminist joy to think that motherhood

might slow Genie down or at least keep her off the job market when it was my turn. At least I am having a twenties, I thought, though my twenties, which I'd treated with a cast-down-your-bucket-where-you-are approach, had thus far only brought me a string of men who were all very sad about some quality in themselves that they had no intention of making any effort to change. I took a sip of my Marxist, a vodka cocktail made with such high-end alcohol that at first sip I hadn't recognized it as vodka, having until that party believed that it was the essence of vodka to have an aftertaste like astringent.

Genie went straight from grad school to a fabulous job the same year I headed off for my visiting position; when I landed the tenure-track job a year later, she sent a note of congratulations written on stationery from her own higher-ranked university. For years I had only peripheral knowledge of her life—talks and publications, family photos shared on social media. She and James had a daughter, Octavia, who appeared to take to the camera the way Genie had as a child, and I watched her grow from baby-faced to long-limbed and theatrical. There'd been no note of congratulations when I joined IPH, and when Genie and her family stopped appearing in my social media feeds I thought maybe I'd been downsized from her Friends roster, having become professionally unimportant. When she reappeared, to my astonishment, it was to join IPH two years after I had. She was divorced, parted from her tenure-track job in her

pre-tenure year under murky circumstances rumored to involve a lawsuit, had shaved her hair down to a crisp teenie Afro, and no longer went by Genie—it was Genevieve now.

The Genie I remembered would have had expansive ideas about our mission but would have spent years charming the director into coming around to them, while parroting her parents on the virtues of treading lightly. *Genevieve* said in our first office meeting during her first week that we were tiptoeing around history to the point that we might as well be lying to people. She wanted a guideline emphasizing that lies of omission were still lies. In the field, she amended a sign quoting the Declaration of Independence with portions of the worst of *Notes on the State of Virginia*. She was instructed not to come back to the National Portrait Gallery after she stood in front of the *Gauguin* for hours telling viewers about his abuse of underage Tahitian girls. She made a tourist child cry at Mount Vernon when she talked about Washington's vicious pursuit of his runaway slaves, and she was formally asked by the only Virginia field historian to avoid making further corrections in the state. The following month she talked her way into the Kennedy Center and "corrected" hundreds of programs for that evening's showing of a beloved musical where George Washington was written as a kindly paternal figure, noting that in real life Washington had not been a jovial singing Black man, and including an extensive list of his atrocities. She was, she protested when our director

reprimanded her, not in the state of Virginia when she made the correction.

That was the only Genevieve clarification I had previously been called in for—less a clarification really, and more a minor PR campaign. I got complimentary tickets to the show and brought Daniel. A picture of us in the audience ran on the agency account, along with an apologia for having overstepped. *We know the difference between history and artistry*, the post said. I didn't write it—I didn't work online—and Elena had refused the assignment; the actual text was written by one of the two white men named Steve whom I couldn't always tell apart because I'd never learned their last names. IPH hadn't needed me to weigh in; they'd only needed my face, to show that I was one of the reasonable ones. My face only barely held up its part of the bargain—in the picture, Daniel looked quizzical and I was grimacing. I had never seen the show before and was inclined to agree with Genevieve's critique, if not her methods.

I didn't say any of that to the director, but I took Genevieve out for a drink at an upscale Black-owned bar on U Street to apologize. We had socialized minimally since she'd started at the agency, and though we blamed it on working mostly outside of the office, and Genevieve juggling joint custody, I knew it wasn't scheduling that stood between us. I was sincere enough in being sorry for my role in things that we left the bar almost on good terms, but on

our way back to Metro, we passed a bar with a young and multiracial crowd and a weekly hip-hop and classic rock dance party. Its name—Dodge City—was a nod to both its country-western decor and DC's derogatory nickname from the '90s, when the city was the country's murder capital and so many people, most of them young and Black, were killed in its streets that a joke about the likelihood of being shot there became a way of saying where you were from.

Genevieve wanted to go inside and footnote the bar's name on the cocktail menus with an explanation of the violence it referenced, and I had to threaten to call the director before she relented. I walked home, furious at still being the bad guy, and also remembering the way Genevieve's parents had talked about the revival of U Street when we were children, the way Genevieve had adopted their disdain in adolescence, how much they'd spoken of the city's past and future, and how little they'd wanted to be connected with the Black people living in its dilapidated present until most of them had been pushed out. Where was the correction for that?

Genevieve gave up on me again. For her remaining time at IPH, our interactions stopped at cordial acknowledgment. It was the kind of tension that in the beginning seemed it might still be resolved, but went on long enough that the grievance settled, turned so solid that trying to make pleasant chitchat around it would have felt

disrespectful. Besides, I knew if I did resolve things with her, I would end up in the middle of whatever battle she picked next, and I couldn't afford that. I told myself that in the institute's good graces, I could still do some good.

If it had only been the occasional play or bar that Genevieve raised a fuss about, she might have lasted longer, but Genevieve's most persistent and controversial grievance was the passive voice atrocity: wherever there was a memorial, she wanted to name not just the dead but the killers. She corrected every memorial to lynching, every note about burnt schoolhouses and destroyed business districts, murdered leaders and bombed churches, that failed to say exactly who had done it. She thought the insistence on victims without wrongdoers was at the base of the whole American problem, the lie that supported all the others. She upset people. She jeopardized the whole project, and for nothing, said our more liberal colleagues. She was not correcting falsehoods, said the more conservative, she was adding revisionist addendums. They said these things to my face, assuming, because we did not seem to be friends, that I disagreed with her.

My problem, alas, had never been as simple as Genie being wrong. In fourth grade, she'd been right about my hair: I had insisted on doing it myself, and my parents were willing to let me learn through trial and error. In high school, Genie might have found a nicer way to put it than



## THE OFFICE OF HISTORICAL CORRECTIONS

“You know they only keep telling you you’re a good poet because they expect us to be illiterate?” but my poetry wasn’t actually as good as teachers’ praise for it. In grad school, Genie asked me once what my parents wanted for me, and I said that they just wanted me to be happy. Genie said “That explains a lot then,” and I said “What?” and Genie said “I’ve met a lot of Black women who had to learn it was OK to choose to be happy, but you’re the only one I know who was raised to expect it.”

It was hard to reconcile people-pleasing Genie with abrasive Genevieve, but they had in common usually being correct. IPH disagreed and had forced her out after just over a year and a dozen write-ups for policy violations. Being indignant on Genevieve’s behalf was unsettling. The very fact of Genie being Genevieve was unsettling. Just as I was accepting that I had grown into as much of a different person as I was ever going to become, Genevieve showed up proving it was still possible to entirely reinvent yourself. Perhaps in whatever years Genie was turning into Genevieve, I was supposed to have been turning into someone called Cassandra. Worse, perhaps I had already turned into Cassandra; perhaps it was Cassandra who made her white colleagues feel so comfortable that they whispered to her while waiting for the coffee to brew or the microwave to ding, “Genevieve—she’s a lot, isn’t she?” Cassandra whom the director trusted to fix Genevieve’s missteps on

behalf of the U.S. government. Perhaps I'd been Cassandra for some time now, walking around using some bolder girl's name.

**IN THE DIRECTOR'S OFFICE**, I opened the blue folder with a suspicion that it would become obvious to me why I had been chosen for this assignment, why this particular Genevieve problem needed a Black woman's face. The issue surrounded a memorial plaque in Cherry Mill, Wisconsin, a small town in the Fox River Valley, about an hour northwest of Milwaukee. Technically, we were federal; Wisconsin was not out of bounds—we could make corrections on vacation, even—but no one from the DC office would be sent there without special circumstances, so what Genevieve had been doing in Wisconsin was for her to know and the clarification file to guess. A generation ago someone would have stopped her from going at all: Cherry Mill had been a sundown town by reputation if not actual ordinance. From the dawn of its existence through the 1980 census it had zero Black residents, officially. In 1937 it apparently had one, briefly, though he was gone before a census caught him: a man named Josiah Wynslow. He'd gone from Mississippi to Chicago and Chicago to Milwaukee. In Milwaukee he'd come into luck—somehow he'd leaped from his job at a meat-packing plant to one as a driver and general errand boy for a Milwaukee tanner who,

having watched what the war, the Depression, and the sheer passage of time did to industries and the workers in them, moonlighted as a radical socialist. He died, childless and ornery enough to leave Josiah most of his money. It was less than it would have been before the Depression, much less than it would have been when the tanning industry was in its heyday, but it was still a small fortune for a Black man a decade removed from Mississippi sharecropping.

It was hard to say from the record what his boss meant of the gift—whether it was a gesture of kindness, or a final experiment, or a fuck-you to the society he felt had failed itself—but Josiah took the money, sold his share of the business, and left the city. Even Milwaukee, eventually one of the Blackest cities in the country, barely had a Black population in the '30s, and what there was had been redlined into two diminishing neighborhoods and waxed and waned with the fortunes of the plants that occasionally recruited from Chicago. Josiah, for reasons the file knew not, left Milwaukee for the even whiter and more openly hostile Cherry Mill, where he bought a defunct printing shop from a white man who was about to lose it to the bank, with the apparent intention of turning it into his own tannery and leather goods shop. On the subject of race, Wisconsin was a strange cocktail of progressivism and old-fashioned American anti-Blackness. It had passed one of the earliest civil rights ordinances in the country in 1895 but immediately

reduced the remedy for discrimination so much that it wasn't worth the cost of court to sue. Portions of the state had been welcoming enough, if pushed by protest, in its early history, but as in many northern cities, as the number of Black residents grew, so did the number of restrictions on where they could live, socialize, be served, or own property. There had never been a lynching in the state of Wisconsin, the heyday of the Klan was over, and Wisconsin had stayed so white for so long that for decades its local Klan mostly harassed Italians, but no place remained unwelcoming through innocence. There were no restrictive covenants in Cherry Mill when Josiah arrived because previously there had been no one in town to restrict. The man who sold him the location took the money and ran before he had to answer to his neighbors, but find out the neighbors did, and Josiah was repeatedly told to leave town and leave the deed behind or have it taken by force. Repeatedly he did not go.

Josiah was thirty in 1937, old enough to remember the South before he'd left it and the Midwest when he'd arrived, Tulsa and Chicago in 1919, and St. Louis before that, still raw in communal memory. He should have known better than to stay put, and still he stayed put, stayed for months, until a group of concerned citizens came in the night and set the place on fire. He had not finished clearing out the old printing debris and had already hauled in some of his tanning supplies; the basement was stocked with bar-

what year was this happening?

rels of lye and the place was completely engulfed before he had a chance to get out. For years, this had been openly bragged about, a warning to anyone who might try it next. By the '60s it had become a quiet open secret, and then a nearly lost memory, until it was rediscovered by a graduate student in the late '90s doing archive work with the local newspaper. The result of the ensuing town meetings and public shame was a memorial plaque that went up at the former site of the building where Josiah died.

The sign was there for decades, long enough that it went generally unnoticed. Then Genevieve spotted it. She issued a correction and took the additional liberty of not just sticking but replacing the existing plaque: hers added to Josiah's name the names of those known to have participated in the mob, names known because they had identified themselves in a surviving photograph of the spectacle. Eight of Cherry Mill's adults, seven men, two with small children sitting on their shoulders, and one woman, smiling and holding an infant, had posed and smiled for a photograph that someone had captioned *The Cherry Mill Defenders: Fire Purifies*. Their names and the date were on the back, in neat cursive penmanship. This, I gathered, was what had set Genevieve digging, what had made her upset enough to go looking for the sign to amend it.

"Let me guess," I said to the director, once I had scanned the file. "Someone is sure there's been an error and their dear grandfather who wouldn't have hurt a fly wasn't a part

of this ugliness. It was his doppelgänger in the photo and his name on the sign is a mistake and they want it taken down.”

“Not quite. A guy—one Andy Detry—did go looking because his grandfather was named, but he says his grandfather was a right bastard and he was looking to see what became of the victim’s family afterward, and whether there was anything he could do to help set things right. What he found, he says, was the victim might not have been killed. Says his digging turned up two death certificates and some living relatives to suggest the victim escaped very much alive and went back to Illinois, where he went on to have a big family. Josiah’s surviving relatives joined the clarification request.”

“Can’t we just correct it then?” I asked.

“Well there’s a problem,” he said.

“We need to know whose body they claimed was Josiah’s?”

“Not exactly. There’s no record that there was a body. Total structural collapse and a town full of people who were eager to reclaim the land. Under those circumstances I imagine the word of witnesses would be enough for a death certificate and probably some shenanigans about the deed or the next of kin—after he died, the property somehow turned up in the name of the husband of the woman in the picture. But I’m not asking you to solve an eighty-year-old hypothetical property crime. The body I’m worried about is

very much alive. Genevieve has been emailing the office and threatening FOIA requests on this one if we don't keep her updated. I wouldn't be surprised if she's still asking questions of the people of Cherry Mill too. Her sign kicked up some fuss there, and there could be media on this one."

"You're sending me so if there's news footage of an agent taking down a memorial sign with Genevieve screaming in the background, it's two Black women yelling at each other and not a white guy in a suit tearing down the evidence of a crime?"

"I'm sending you because you have good sense and you're not looking for the attention. You can wear a suit if you'd like. Whether or not we list the killers is a philosophical question that I know we don't all see the same way. Whether someone forged a will or a deed or a death certificate to acquire the property is out of our jurisdiction entirely. But whether they declared a living man dead and we doubled down on their mistake—that's facts. And if you find it to be true that the sign is a mistake, Genevieve will take it better coming from you than from anyone else in this office."

"Genevieve will or the *Post* will?"

"It is very much my hope that this clarification is so simple and boring and handled without drama that the *Post* takes absolutely no interest in it no matter how many times Genevieve calls them. Do you get me?"

"I do," I said.

“Can you handle this for me?”

“I can,” I said.

I CARRIED THE CAKE HOME on Metro and practiced ways to tell Daniel I was leaving for Wisconsin in a few days. I didn't trust the state: my first job had been in Eau Claire; I had felt dazzled by its beauty and also claustrophobic the whole time, charmed by and hostile toward a region I had never entirely forgiven for its commitment to civility and conflict avoidance. Midwest nice was a steady, polite gaslighting I found sinister, a forced humility that prevented anyone from speaking up when they'd been diminished or disrespected, lest they be labeled an outsider. I was bewildered by the pride the region took in these pathologies. I didn't trust my role at IPH, or at least I didn't trust anymore my assumption that as long as I didn't openly defy the agency, I'd be left alone to do work that mattered. I didn't trust my own motivations. I wanted for once to get something right when Genevieve was wrong, but I also wanted my assignment to the case to be because I was careful and thorough and would ask the right questions, not because my friendly brown face would make good damage control when the agency discredited Genevieve, again. I didn't trust my impulse to call Nick, my last serious ex, who was still in Milwaukee so far as I knew, and tell him I was



coming to town, and I didn't trust myself to explain any of it to Daniel.

Daniel and I had met three years earlier, at a happy hour that Elena dragged me to. I'd been restless, nostalgic for the work I'd left: my nearly finished manuscript nagged at me, and it was disorienting having just experienced the second fall in my lifetime that I didn't answer to an academic calendar. I still missed having an ongoing research project, and I had begun to design whimsical minor empirical studies, including one surrounding my wardrobe. When I was teaching, I'd been alert to which classes trusted me most when I was drab, dressed in blacks and grays and covered in a blazer, hair locked into place and makeup subdued, and which trusted me most when I looked eccentric, when my dresses and scarves and jewelry blazed and dangled and my lipstick was always red. There was always a question of how my appearance affected my credibility, but the answer was never the same from semester to semester. When I began at IPH, I tried out different styles on the general public: formal versus informal, eclectic versus reserved, cleavage versus covered. That day's experiment, an elegant blue dress with a moderately interesting neckline and a jaunty scarf, hair pressed flat and then curled again for body, had me looking more than usual the young professional. It fell into the *people were happier to speak with me, but more likely to argue with me about whether I knew what I*

*was talking about* quadrant of my wardrobe chart, and it made me feel out of place at Elena's neighborhood bar, which pulled its crowd from artists and grad students and NGO workers, people who wouldn't recognize me as one of their own in my current ensemble. It was a small thing, but I thought of it often lately: how out of character I'd looked when Daniel and I met, how unlike myself.

I had been sitting in one of a circle of metal chairs outside by the patio heat lamp, which glowed softly and was almost romantic, except that the patio faced Eleventh Street traffic and was sandwiched between a dog park and a rowdy sports bar. I caught Daniel's eye as we were both surveying the landscape.

"Do you know what the problem with DC is?" he said casually, scooting his chair closer as though we were old friends in the middle of a conversation just arriving at a point of intimacy that required us to keep our voices down. It was a habit he had with everyone, something I came to understand as his journalism mode, the one that got people to drop their guards by strolling right past them, but at the time I felt seen, interesting.

"There's only one problem?" I asked.

"Well, no. I mean the reason nobody ever tried to preserve anything until it was too late, the reason we're going to lose all the mom-and-pop operations and corner stores and carryouts?"

"Money?"

“No and yes. The problem is everyone, even Black people, believes that Black poverty is the worst poverty in the world, and Black urban poverty, forget it, and all urban Blackness always scans as poverty, which means people only love us as fetish. No one is sentimental about poor Black people unless they’re wise and country and you could put a photograph of them on a porch with a quilt behind them in a museum. There’s always a white person out there who wants to overpronounce a foreign word, or try an exotic food, or shop for crafts, but no one wants to do that for Black folks. Once white people started thinking they were better at urban Blackness than Black folks, it was game over. My dad grew up three blocks from here, but his parents lost their town house to property taxes and he can’t even bring himself to drive into the city to visit me. Says he’s going to get himself arrested one day driving up Fourteenth Street, yelling out the window cursing Barry for selling the city out from under folks.”

“Wow,” I said. “Are we already at the part where we talk about our families?”

“I don’t like small talk,” he said. “Tell me about yours.”

I did. I was the child of two federal employees, raised in a city where integrated federal jobs had crucially sustained the Black middle class. The most bewildering part of leaving DC the first time was discovering that elsewhere people casually used “federal government” as a pejorative. I needed no convincing of the fatal possibilities of

government overreach, of the way the fatalities told the story of who the nation considered expendable, but, even after the low points of the previous decade, I believed in government, or at least believed in it more than the alternative. That my country might always expect me to audition for my life I accepted as fact, but I trusted the public charter of national government more than I trusted average white citizens acting unchecked. I believed in government, I had come to understand, the way that agnostics who hadn't been to service in decades sometimes hedged their bets and brought their babies to be baptized or otherwise welcomed into the religions of their parents' youth. I had abandoned the actual religion I was raised with as soon as I got to college, but when in moments of despair I needed the inspiration of a triumphant martyr figure who made me believe in impossible things, I thought not of saints or saviors but of my mother.

When she was pregnant with me, she'd gone down to Louisiana on behalf of the Justice Department, charged with enforcing a school desegregation order that was nearly older than she was. She was twenty-five and six months pregnant, fresh out of law school and the sole employee sent to investigate. When she arrived, she was shepherded around by eleven different Black people who wanted to make sure that she knew the men in the truck who followed her with shotguns were the local Klan. By the time I was born, the people of that small Louisiana parish had

nothing yet but faith and a high school in underfunded disrepair, but they believed in my mother and sent her home with a chest of handmade blankets and bibs and baby clothes, and by the time I was a year old, the parish's Black high school had a science wing with lab equipment and new textbooks. That was the small victory so offensive to the local government that they had been willing to raise weapons in defense of it before the Justice Department in the form of my mother arrived. I asked her to tell me that story over and over, to tell me the name of the person who'd made me each doll or bib or blanket. It was my first experience of faith. It was part of why I'd jumped at the chance to come to IPH—I had imagined it was my best chance to be part of a legacy, something meaningfully bigger than myself.

DANIEL ASKED SO MANY QUESTIONS about my parents and my childhood that I thought he'd forgotten we were flirting, or where the story ended—with me, with my job and my hopes for the future—but after a few minutes he let the conversation wander back.

“So, IPH? When I first saw you, I figured you for something depressing and corporate you were here to drink away your guilt about.”

“Is that why you didn't start by asking what I do?”

“I never start there. It's an easy trick for being the least

predictable person at a DC party. Ask anything other than 'What do you do?' If people want you to know, they'll still find a way to tell you."

"So are you pleasantly surprised that I'm not a corporate sellout?"

"Do you really think it's a good idea for the government to be in the business of telling people what the truth is?"

"It's not the government, it's me," I said. "And it's not the truth in some abstract ideological sense. It's the actual historical record. I was a professor for three years. I loved teaching, but all my resources went into bringing information to the exact people who would have gotten it somehow anyway. Now I can be anywhere."

"But so can anybody," he said. "What happens when you leave and the office is full of people with a different agenda?"

"I guess I don't leave," I said. "Isn't that the point of being a career civil servant? Administrations come and go and there you are, doing the work. Did you change how you did your job when your newspaper got sold?"

"You strike me as the leaving type," he said, avoiding the question. We both laughed and treated it as though he had paid me a compliment, though later it would occur to me there was no reason it should have been. Things started quickly between us but then didn't seem to know where to go. We were busy; I had recently declared myself to be beyond giddy girlish feelings and their accompanying heart-

her job title?

break; he'd broken an engagement a month before he met me, though I gathered some months later that while the wedding was off by then, the fiancée hadn't yet entirely disappeared from his life. I didn't pry—there was no arrangement we'd made, and if there had been, the way things were headed I would have held on to it quietly, certain already that someday I'd need forgiveness, or something to hold against him.

TONIGHT I HAD INTENDED a mood for Daniel's birthday: candles, the cake, a change of clothes, my good lipstick. But when Daniel arrived I was thoroughly unmade, the candles unlit, and the cake still in its box. I had shed my pants and bra, but was still wearing a work blouse over yoga pants, sitting on the living room floor with the contents of the clarification file spread in front of me.

"I got you a cake," I called when he walked in. "It's on the table."

"Fancy cake," he said, a moment later. I looked up and found him staring into the cake box.

"I was working Capitol Hill today. I had to go to a gentrification bakery."

"Is there any other kind anymore? I was just talking to a cat who grew up there yesterday. Working on a long piece about what happened to the property people lost to back taxes. Did you at least get to yell at any tourists?"

“Not even one.”

“All I wanted for my birthday was a video of you just once cursing out a white person who should know better.” He sat beside me and gestured at the papers. “So what did you get me? A scavenger hunt?”

I leaned into him. He had stopped at home, I noted, had changed out of his work-routine suit and into a dress shirt, smelled like good cologne—woody and bright—and coconut oil. I kissed him. He began to sort through the contents of the file, and I decided it would be both rude and futile to demand privacy. I gave him the basics and let him look through the records with me.

“I’m sorry I didn’t make fancier plans,” I said. “I’m trying to figure out what happened to a guy who tried to buy property in the thirties and may or may not have died for it. See? You can hate my job all you want, but we’re both trying to solve the mystery of why this country doesn’t let Black people keep anything.”

“Boo-Boo the fool could solve that mystery. The real question is how we get it back.”

“Black love is Black wealth.”

“Isn’t that poem about being broke?”

“Look, I got you a gen<sup>er</sup>ified cake, a pile of evidence about how much our country hates us, and a Nikki Giovanni metaphor about dealing with it. Happy Birthday. Make it count, because I have to leave town soon to deal with all this—it’s a clarification on one of Genevieve’s corrections.”



“Why don’t they just let Genevieve be? It’s bad enough they drove her out. Now they can’t stop undoing everything she did while she was there?”

“It’s not like that. This might be an actual mistake. I have to go to Wisconsin and find out whether or not this man was actually murdered.”

“Wisconsin.”

“You know that’s not it.”

“Do I?”

“This is a work thing—I have to make a correction. It might even be a relatively happy one, but I have to do it gently enough that we don’t have to go on another apology tour or duel the goddamn Free Americans in the press.”

“So you’re letting them use you now so you don’t have to let them use you later.”

“Them who?”

“You tell me.”

“I don’t have anything to prove,” I said. “If there’s someplace else you’d rather be on your birthday, I’m not keeping you here.”

“I guess you’re not,” Daniel said, getting up. “But, for the record, this was where I wanted to be.”

I refused to meet his eyes. I stared at the floor and waited for the door to slam and then got up and ate two slices of Daniel’s birthday cake for dinner. The buttercream was exquisite but the cake itself was dry and crumbly. I overthought the metaphor. I had made the wrong choice,

clearly, but had I made it in trying at all or in not trying hard enough? The night had probably been salvageable when I let him leave. Things were always salvageable between us, and knowing that felt like both a relief and an obligation. I wanted to be able to go out into the world with him and protect him from anything that might harm him, and I knew that I could not; I wanted to leave for Wisconsin with the freedom to be disappointing and I knew that I could.

I went back to my documents. The researcher tasked with assembling clarification files had done a thorough job. In the file there was an article about the fire from the *Appleton Gazette* and an obituary that had run later, in the *Wisconsin Enterprise-Blade*, calling for an investigation that of course never came. The *Gazette* article focused on the chemical cause of the fire and included a photograph of the damage, but the obituary included a grainy photograph of Josiah himself, and a bit of biographical detail. Josiah Wynslow had dimples and an easy smile. In the photo he looked younger than he had been when he died, but the stylish hat and suit made me think the picture had been taken in Chicago and not Mississippi—somewhere there was still a before Joe, a Mississippi boy who hadn't yet followed the great migration north. So much violence and lack waiting on the other end of the violence and lack that people poured out of the South to escape, and still they kept believing there was someplace in this country where

they could be Black and be safe and make a home. Chicago, at least, had the pull of community in its favor, had decades of sales pitches calling the Black Belt up north, decades of people who had already learned to call the city a home. How was it that Josiah Wynslow had left Chicago and come to believe he could make his home in a place where no one wanted him, had wanted to stay there badly enough to die or cheat death?

. . .

Officially, I was staying at a Ramada off the highway somewhere between Cherry Mill and the Milwaukee airport. Unofficially, I had texted Nick from National before my plane took off, and while it was possible his number had changed since we'd last been in touch, or that he was no longer in Milwaukee at all, or that he would choose to ignore my message, I was entirely unsurprised to see him waiting for me at the arrivals gate. His hair was shorter than I was used to it being, and it made his eyes, already a startling blue, stand out conspicuously. We had parted last on bad terms too inconclusive to be permanent. A few years ago he'd come to DC for a conference, and when we'd tried to have a friendly drink, he'd chastised me for leaving my position at GW, accused me of both wasting my talents and working in the service of empire, which seemed contradictory: my job could be menial or it could be gravely

problematic, but not both. Now he seemed contrite—he offered a ride and a home-cooked meal. I was committed enough to the premise that we were harmless to each other to insist he drive me first to check into my hotel, and to keep the room keycard in my pocket as though I would need it later, but honest enough that my suitcase didn't make it out of the trunk until we arrived at his loft.

I'd met Nick in graduate school in a different state, and our time in this one had overlapped only by a single summer, at the end of my visiting gig in Eau Claire, and just before he'd started teaching at UW-Milwaukee. I spent most of that summer with him in his half-unpacked apartment, a cookie-cutter basic one bedroom I imagined exactly mirrored the apartment on the other side of the cheap plasterboard walls. When he said he lived in a loft now, I expected he'd stayed in the city and moved into something more aesthetically pleasing, one of those abandoned industrial spaces gone pricey, cavernous, and artisanal, with concrete floors and floor-to-ceiling windows, but, in fact, he lived in what my younger self would have called the woods, though I now knew it was merely rural, and that only barely. Nick's childhood had been odd: he'd grown up monied half the time and rurally pragmatic the rest; his mother was the abandoned first wife of a man who went on to money. He'd gone to boarding school and then come home in the summer to be working middle class; he looked every bit the

overgrown prep-school boy, but those summers were the roots he tended to play up. His house was a converted barn, and though I would not have put it past him to have taken his desire to transcend his patrician roots so far that he was now supplementing his academic work with farm labor, he explained that he had bought the barn from the family who used to run the place, and though one of the farmer's children still lived in the house across the field, there was no farming happening anymore, the farm not having the capital to invest in the dairy industry's turn to mechanical labor or the cushion to survive without an investment.

"I did a lot of renovations myself," he said. "But there's no livestock involved, so I hope you didn't come all this way to see me milk a cow."

"I didn't come all this way to see you at all," I said.

When he'd moved here, he'd said it was because teaching at a state school better suited his praxis, though quietly I had heard his leaving had been slightly more contentious than that, that it involved a badly ended affair with a graduate student, which I believed insofar as I had also been a graduate student there, though to the extent that our involvement had ended, it was me who had ended it both times, in each case saved from my own worse impulses by a job in a different state. When we met, Nick was a junior professor and soon to be divorced. We had a two-body problem, he told people, but just going on offhand gossip, by my

count there had been at least nine other bodies involved on his part alone by the time his wife called things off.

Such was his level of charm that it was hard to be disgusted by it: Nick expected a door to open and it did; he expected to be adored and he was. Before Nick, I had been eating at the same three restaurants and drinking at the same two bars for years because it spared me the exhaustion of walking into a new place and convincing them I belonged and they should treat me kindly, of greeting clerks and waitpersons in my PhD voice, dropping the name of the university when necessary, generously overtipping. It was a revelation to move through the world with Nick, to see how little attention a white man needed to devote to that kind of performance, how much of his worry about how other people saw him could be consumed by the frivolous, how easy it was for me to be assumed respectable merely by association. It was in some ways the thing I'd liked least about him, even less than things that were actually his fault: when I went places with him, things were easier; when I was with him, the *do they know I'm human yet* question that hummed in me every time I met a new white person quieted a little, not because I could be sure of the answer but because I could be sure in his presence they'd at least pretend.

Though he was a political scientist, not a historian, I had taken a jointly listed class with Nick my first year in graduate school, but our dalliance had not begun until the

next fall, when we found ourselves trapped in a cocktail party corner with a drunk senior faculty member who said he wasn't complaining, exactly, about political correctness, but he did miss, sometimes, humor, or the capacity for particular kinds of observation, that he had told a harmless joke and his undergraduates had complained that it was racist. Alarmed that he was going to segue into the joke, and I was about to learn who would laugh and who wouldn't, I intervened brightly to suggest that I too sometimes worried my funniest jokes might offend, for example, *A white man walks into a room*. While everyone waited for the punch line, I excused myself and headed to the porch. *That's it*, I called behind me. *That's the whole joke. Everything else disappears*.

Nick had appeared outside beside me a few minutes later. He put a hand on my shoulder and gave it a firmer squeeze than was comforting.

"I would have said something if he'd told his joke," said Nick.

"Isn't it nice that we'll never have to know if that's true," I said, and after we shared a cigarette we left the party together and stayed intermittently together for the next two years. Once I was alone again, navigating my way through a beautiful but bleak Eau Claire winter and trying to find the people and places welcoming enough to feel like home, I realized I had become so accustomed to Nick's presence that it was surprising again when I went places and people

treated me like myself. It was the winter after the most depressing election of my adult life, a low point for my faith in the polis, and I had started keeping an unofficial tally in my head of how much I trusted each new white person I met. It was a pitiful tally, because I had decided most of them would forgive anyone who harmed me, would worry more about vocal antiracism ruining the holiday party season and causing the cheese plates to go to waste than about the lives and sanity of the nonwhite humans in their midst. I couldn't, of course, say any of that aloud, though what minimal decorum I had I'd only recently reacquired: I'd become accustomed to Nick shielding me from the more outrageous things I said. Without him, I had to relearn a certain modulation. Back in DC, first with men whose birthdays and favorite colors I didn't bother memorizing, and then eventually with Daniel, I'd had to learn again how to watch a man move through the world and calibrate his every step to be disarming, how to watch a man worry about his body and the conditions under which someone might take his any gesture the wrong way. I'd had to remember back to high school, when my heart belonged only to boys my color, to whom I had to insist that no one else's disrespect of me was worth a fight, was worth what a fight would cost them. That Daniel could only assume everything about my relationship with Nick had been exploitative bored me. That it wasn't only Nick that Daniel would have hated, but the person I became when I was with

very  
very  
true.



him, cockier, more reckless, willing to take it all for granted: that kept me up at night, or at least, sometimes it kept me up, or as a metaphor it kept me up. In Nick's room, in his platform bed, under the locally made quilt, I in fact slept very well.

OVER BREAKFAST we skirted the issue of my purpose for being there. The night before I'd withheld most of the details—pled state secrets and repeated back to him the years-ago insults he'd lobbed at my work. "It wouldn't interest you why I'm here," I said, knowing full well nothing interested Nick like a mystery. At his breakfast table, after eating locally made yogurt and granola I caved and explained the background of the case. I wanted him to come with me and do the magic thing that made strangers in small towns more welcoming, and I wanted, I supposed, another read on the situation.

He offered to drive me all the way to Cherry Mill, since I hadn't picked up my rental car yet. In the car, he gave me what felt like the tourism board's official spiel on everything charming to discover there. I was certain it would indeed be charming, but the Upper Midwest made me moody; people made me feel like I was being asked to speak a language I'd never learned and in which I was constantly misunderstood. When I lived here, it had taken me months to recognize that the pushy advice strangers gave

about things like where to buy cheaper bottled water and which store was having a sale were not meant to be intrusive or judgmental or presumptuous but simply friendly, that they were considered friendly whether or not I experienced them that way, and even more months for me to understand that long meandering conversations full of small talk, the kind I considered a brief prelude to real human interaction, were never going to open up into genuine discussions or open expressions of feeling on their own, they were only going to restart on a loop. Once I had offended a Minnesotan colleague at IPH by saying it was no surprise this region was full of serial killers because what could be easier than being a horrifying person in a community where gossip and open conflict were shunned. The next day I found affixed to my desk a corrections sticker noting that most serial killers came from California, followed closely by Florida.

So far as history recorded there had never been a serial killer in Cherry Mill. True cherry-growing country was farther north, in Door County. I'd made the drive up with Nick the summer we'd spent here together and had to concede it was idyllic, even though I didn't like cherries and distrusted lakes. Cherry Mill was in the Fox River Valley, just south of a cannery and situated in between two paper mills. It was close enough to Lake Winnebago that it picked up vacation traffic, though mostly from visitors who couldn't travel far. Still, I recognized in the solicitous festivity of the

two blocks that comprised downtown something of the energy of DC in summer, the desperate language of tourist traps everywhere, selling a performance for people eager to believe they'd found whatever they'd come for.

The candy store that we were looking for, the one that stood on the lot that had once been Josiah's, was a redbrick building, but someone had painted a scattering of bricks in bright primary colors, zigzagging down the exterior. The marquee advertised it as THE SUGAR MILL, with a giant lollipop and candy apple, and a handwritten sign in the window suggested the cherry taffy or the brandy fudge, both of which were homemade and on sale. Through the windows I could see the checkered floor and wooden countertops. I distrusted, in general, appeals to nostalgia—I loved the past of archives, but there was no era of the past I had any inclination to visit with my actual human body, being rather fond of it having at least minimal rights and protections. I tried to think of what this block would have looked like when Josiah first set eyes on it, what about it would have called to him.

The sign I had come to see faced the small lot where Nick parked the car. It was unobtrusive, easy not to notice if you weren't looking for it, which had, according to the file, been a source of some contention when the first sign went up in the '90s. The store owner won the placement debate, arguing that she didn't mind having the sign, but no one wanted it to be the first thing children saw when

they came to get sweets. Genevieve's new sign was brassier, but still located in the same spot, on the side of the building, near the parking lot:

IN 1937 AFRICAN AMERICAN SHOPKEEPER JOSIAH WYNSLOW WAS KILLED WHEN A MOB INTENDING TO KEEP CHERRY MILL WHITE BURNED DOWN THE ORIGINAL BUILDING WHILE HE WAS INSIDE. THIS TYPE OF VIOLENCE WAS AT ONE POINT FREQUENT ALL OVER THE COUNTRY, AND THOUGH THERE WERE FEW OFFICIAL RESTRICTIVE COVENANTS IN WISCONSIN THEN, IN PART BECAUSE THE AFRICAN AMERICAN POPULATION WAS SO MINIMAL, RACIAL RESTRICTIONS AND THE BOUNDARIES OF "SUNDOWN TOWNS" WERE OFTEN ENFORCED LESS OFFICIALLY THROUGH VIOLENCE OR INTIMIDATION. CITIZENS INVOLVED IN THE BURNING OF THE STORE AND THE MURDER OF JOSIAH WYNSLOW WERE NEVER CHARGED OR PUNISHED IN ANY WAY, THOUGH MANY PUBLICLY BRAGGED ABOUT THEIR RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE CRIME. THE NAMES OF THE INDIVIDUALS KNOWN TO BE INVOLVED ARE GUNNAR WEST, ANDERSON PIEKOWSKI, GENE NORMAN, RONALD BUNCH, ED SCHWARTZE, PETER DETRY, AND GEORGE AND ELLA MAE SCHMIDT. GEORGE SCHMIDT TOOK OVER THE PROPERTY AFTER THE MURDER AND SOLD IT AT A PROFIT IN 1959.

I checked the file. The original sign had started off the same way, but where the identifying names appeared in Genevieve's sign, the original final line had read *Today in Cherry Mill we welcome all as friends and visitors, and are glad to have learned from the past.*

In the front of the shop, a woman was standing in the window flipping the CLOSED sign to OPEN. She was a collage of reds, candy apple lipstick, and hair the color of grenadine, her dress a faded burgundy and her skin freckled and sun-blushed pink. She waved.

"Welcome," she said. "We're open now if you have a sweet tooth."

"It all looks wonderful," I said, "but unfortunately today calls for caffeine before sugar and business before pleasure."

"Business? Are you here with the young lady who came by earlier? The one who kicked up all the fuss a few months back?"

"What lady?" I asked, forcing a smile and arriving at the answer to my own question even before I heard her description of Genevieve.

**GENEVIEVE WAS SITTING** in the window of the coffee shop, reading the morning paper. She had let her hair grow out a bit since I had seen her last, and now it haloed her face in curls. She was as put together as ever; the heat that

threatened to burn everyone else only seemed to make her glow. As though in solidarity with the sun, she wore a bright yellow dress. She put the paper down and raised her eyebrows when she saw me. I told Nick to wander and let me figure out Genevieve on my own. His plan seemed to be merely to walk up and down the block; as I waited for my coffee and then joined Genevieve at her table, I kept catching flashes of him passing the window.

"I heard you were coming," Genevieve said.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"I have some free time. My ex has Octavia for the month."

"Why is this what you're doing with your free time?"

"You may recall that I am out of a job of late. But as neither IPH nor academia holds a monopoly on the historical record, I'm not necessarily out of a profession. A little bird at project headquarters told me something interesting might be happening here, so I pitched a feature piece on it."

"You're a journalist now?"

"I'm a storyteller, in any medium. For all I don't love about the West Coast, it's lousy with TV people, one of whom thinks if I can create some buzz there might be a market for me yet. History Exposed with Genevieve Johnson." Genevieve fanned out her hands and framed her camera-ready face. "So here I am. And here you are. Buzz buzz buzz. Have a coffee. It's not bad, for Wisconsin."

“Why would it be bad? They fly the same coffee beans here as everywhere else in the country,” I said.

“Wow. Already defensive of the good white people of the Upper Midwest. They’re going to feel so much better when you take my mean old sign down.”

“I’m not here to take your sign down because it makes people uncomfortable,” I said.

“Oh, nice. You decided to finally stand up for something after I was gone. Why are you here then?”

“Genie. This was my job before it was yours and for longer. Just let me do my job. And if you’re hitting up people at the office for gossip, next time get the whole story.”

“It’s still Genevieve. Come on, Cassie. In a different world, if I wanted to know what was happening with one of your cases, I could have called you.”

I opened my mouth, impulsively reaching for the first adolescent retort that came to mind—*Whose fault is it that you couldn’t call me?*—but before I said the words, I remembered that it was arguably mine.

“I don’t need your help,” I said. “This might turn out to be a simple fact-check. If it doesn’t, you’re not going to make it any easier. I’m guessing open-and-shut historical mysteries don’t sell a lot of reality-TV pitches. Is that really what you’re in this for?”

“As always, I’m in it for the truth. I’m also in it for my custody case, if you need a better reason. James wants primary custody and it’s hard to fight that without a reliable