My god, Mae thought. It's heaven.

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

Mae was making her way through all of this, walking from the parking lot to the main hall, trying to look as if she belonged. The walkway wound around lemon and orange trees and its quiet red cobblestones were replaced, occasionally, by tiles with imploring messages of inspiration. "Dream," one said, the word laser-cut into the red stone. "Participate," said another. There were dozens: "Find Com-

munity." "Innovate." "Imagine." She just missed stepping on the hand of a young man in a grey jumpsuit; he was installing a new stone that said "Breathe."

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

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

While Mae was still at Carleton, meandering between majors,

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

She pushed open the heavy door. The front hall was as long as a parade, as tall as a cathedral. There were offices everywhere above, four floors high on either side, every wall made of glass. Briefly dizzy, she looked downward, and in the immaculate glossy floor, she saw her own face reflected, looking worried. She shaped her mouth into a smile, feeling a presence behind her.

"You must be Mae."

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

"I'm Renata," she said.

"Hi Renata. I'm looking for—"

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

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

Mae smiled. “I hope she’s got some hardtack and a sturdy horse.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So you’ve seen the pool, the sports area.” Renata waved her hand

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

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

"Oh, I love Calder," Mae said.

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

The wind that had followed them in now turned the mobile such that an arm pointed to Mae, as if welcoming her personally. Renata took her elbow. "Ready? Up this way."

They entered an elevator of glass, tinted faintly orange. Lights flickered on and Mae saw her name appear on the walls, along with her high school yearbook photo. WELCOME MAE HOLLAND. A sound, something like a gasp, left Mae's throat. She hadn't seen that photo in years, and had been happy for its absence. This must have been Annie's doing, assaulting her with it again. The picture was indeed Mae—her wide mouth, her thin lips, her olive skin, her black hair, but in this photo, more so than in life, her high cheekbones gave her a look of severity, her brown eyes not smiling, only small and cold, ready for war. Since the photo—she was eighteen then, angry and unsure—Mae had gained much-needed weight, her face had softened and curves appeared, curves that brought the attention of men of myr-

iad ages and motives. She'd tried, since high school, to be more open, more accepting, and seeing it here, this document of a long-ago era when she assumed the worst of the world, rattled her. Just when she couldn't stand it anymore, the photo disappeared.

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

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

The doors opened, splitting the congressman in two.

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

Mae attempted levity: "I guess you don't put anyone with vertigo up here."

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

"No, no," Mae said. "I'm fine."

"Seriously. We can put you lower if—"

"No, no. Really. It's perfect. Sorry. I was making a joke."

Renata was visibly shaken. "Okay. Just let me know if anything's not right."

"I will."

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

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

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

"Okay, here you are."

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

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

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

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

This was not what she expected.

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

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

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

After six or so years of loathing her hometown, of cursing her parents for moving there and subjecting her to it, its limitations and scarcity of everything—diversion, restaurants, enlightened minds—Mae had recently come to remember Longfield with something like tenderness. It was a small town between Fresno and Tranquillity, incorporated and named by a literal-minded farmer in 1866. One hundred and fifty years later, its population had peaked at just

under two thousand souls, most of them working in Fresno, twenty miles away. Longfield was a cheap place to live, and the parents of Mae's friends were security guards, teachers, truckers who liked to hunt. Of Mae's graduating class of eighty-one, she was one of twelve to go to a four-year college, and the only one to go east of Colorado. That she went so far, and went into such debt, only to come back and work at the local utility, shredded her, and her parents, though outwardly they said she was doing the right thing, taking a solid opportunity and getting started in paying down her loans.

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

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

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

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

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

She couldn't stand it. Every day of that job, the eighteen months she worked there, she wondered if she could really ask Annie for a favor. She'd never been one to ask for something like that, to be rescued, to be lifted. It was a kind of neediness, pushiness—*nudginess,* her dad called it, something not bred into her. Her parents were quiet

people who did not like to be in anyone's way, quiet and proud people who took nothing from anyone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mae's heart was pounding. "You're such a sicko."

Annie feigned confusion. "Me? I'm not sick. I'm awesome."

"I can't believe you went to that much trouble to upset me."

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

As Mae followed her, she had to remind herself that Annie had not always been a senior executive at a company like the Circle. There was a time, only four years ago, when Annie was a college student

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

Mae knew this firsthand, having been something of a chauffeur to Annie on long rides, throughout Minnesota and Wisconsin and Iowa, to countless and largely meaningless cross-country contests. Mae had gotten a partial scholarship to run at Carleton, and that's where she met Annie, who was effortlessly good, two years older, but was only intermittently concerned with whether she, or the team, won or lost. One meet Annie would be deep in it, taunting the opponents, insulting their uniforms or SATs, and the next she'd be wholly uninterested

in the outcome but happy to be along for the ride. It was on the long rides, in Annie's car—which she preferred Mae to drive—that Annie would put her bare feet up or out the window, and would riff on the passing scenery, and would speculate, for hours, on what went on in the bedroom of their coaches, a married couple with matching, almost military, haircuts. Mae laughed at everything Annie said, and it kept Mae's mind off the meets, where she, unlike Annie, had to win, or at least do well, to justify the subsidy the college had provided her. They would invariably arrive minutes before the meet, with Annie having forgotten what race she was meant to run, or whether she really wanted to run at all.

And so how was this possible, that this scattershot and ridiculous person, who still carried a piece of her childhood blanket around in her pocket, had risen so quickly and high through the Circle? Now she was part of the forty most crucial minds at the company—the Gang of 40—privy to its most secret plans and data. That she could push through the hiring of Mae without breaking a sweat? That she could set it all up within weeks of Mae finally swallowing all pride and making the ask? It was a testament to Annie's inner will, some mysterious and core sense of destiny. Outwardly, Annie showed no signs of garish ambition, but Mae was sure that there was something within Annie that insisted upon this, that she would have been here, in this position, no matter where she'd come from. If she'd grown up in the Siberian tundra, born blind to shepherds, she still would have arrived here, now.

"Thanks Annie," she heard herself say.

They'd walked past a few conference rooms and lounges and were

passing through the company's new gallery, where a half-dozen Basquiats hung, just acquired from a near-broke museum in Miami.

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

"I do."

"Good, because it's true."

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

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

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

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

"Better to be at the bottom of a ladder you want to climb than in

the middle of some ladder you don't, right? Some shitty-ass ladder made of shit?"

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

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

"You used to be such a sweet girl."

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

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

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

"No, I don't."

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

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

"You are the wood."

"And then I'll be installed."

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

They visited the kennel, a brainchild of Annie, whose dog, Dr. Kinsmann, had just passed on, but who had spent a few very happy years here, never far from his owner. Why should thousands of employees all leave their dogs at home when they could be brought here, to be around people, and other dogs, and be cared for and not alone? That had been Annie's logic, quickly embraced and now

considered visionary. And they saw the nightclub—often used during the day for something called ecstatic dancing, a great workout, Annie said—and they saw the large outdoor amphitheater, and the small indoor theater—"there are about ten comedy improv groups here"—and after they saw all that, there was lunch in the larger, first-floor cafeteria where, in the corner, on a small stage, there was a man, playing a guitar, who looked like an aging singer-songwriter Mae's parents listened to.

"Is that . . . ?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They got into an elevator of plexiglass and neon and rose through the atrium, every floor and office visible as they climbed five floors. "I can't see how stuff like that works into the bottom line here," Mae said.

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

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

"Old school," Mae noted.

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

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

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

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

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

"I know this," Mae said.

"Don't stop me now. I'm giving you the same spiel I have to give to heads of state."

"Okay."

Annie continued.

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

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

Ty had devised the initial system, the Unified Operating System, which combined everything online that had heretofore been separate

and sloppy—users' social media profiles, their payment systems, their various passwords, their email accounts, user names, preferences, every last tool and manifestation of their interests. The old way—a new transaction, a new system, for every site, for every purchase—it was like getting into a different car to run any one kind of errand. "You shouldn't have to have eighty-seven different cars," he'd said, later, after his system had overtaken the web and the world.

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

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

TruYou changed the internet, in toto, within a year. Though some sites were resistant at first, and free-internet advocates shouted

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

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

And Ty had come upon all this more or less by accident. He was tired of remembering identities, entering passwords and his credit-card information, so he designed code to simplify it all. Did he purposely use the letters of his name in TruYou? He said he realized only afterward the connection. Did he have any idea of the commercial implications of TruYou? He claimed he did not, and most people assumed this was the case, that the monetization of Ty's innovations came from the other two Wise Men, those with the experience and business acumen to make it happen. It was they who monetized

TruYou, who found ways to reap funds from all of Ty's innovations, and it was they who grew the company into the force that subsumed Facebook, Twitter, Google, and finally Alacrity, Zoopa, Jefe, and Quan.

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

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

His kind of conspicuous consumption was notably absent from the lives of the other two Wise Men. Ty rented a ramshackle two-bedroom apartment a few miles away, but then again, no one had ever seen him arrive at or leave campus; the assumption was that he lived there. And everyone knew where Eamon Bailey lived—a highly visible, profoundly modest three-bedroom home on a widely accessible street

ten minutes from campus. But Stenton had houses everywhere—New York, Dubai, Jackson Hole. A floor atop the Millennium Tower in San Francisco. An island near Martinique.

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

Of the Three Wise Men, Bailey was the most likely to be seen on campus, to play Dixieland trombone in the company talent show, most likely to appear on talk shows representing the Circle, chuckling when talking about—when shrugging off—this or that FCC investigation, or when unveiling a helpful new feature or game-changing technology. He preferred to be called Uncle Eamon, and when he

strode through campus, he did so as would a beloved uncle, accessible and genuine. "Like Bill Murray striding through Pebble Beach," was how Stenton once described him. "Loved by all, and I think he really loves them back." The three of them, in life and in this portrait, made for a strange bouquet of mismatched flowers, but there was no doubt that it worked. Everyone knew it worked, the three-headed model of management, and the dynamic was thereafter emulated elsewhere in the Fortune 500, with mixed results.

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

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

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

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

"Nice knockers."

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

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

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

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

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

They arrived at the library's top floor, and Annie led Mae through narrow corridors of round-spined books, some of them as tall as

her—Bibles and atlases, illustrated histories of wars and upheavals, long-gone nations and peoples.

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

"Fine."

"Seriously."

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

"Good. Now when I move this book . . . " Annie said, removing a large volume titled *The Best Years of Our Lives*. "Watch this," she said, and backed up. Slowly, the wall, bearing a hundred books, began to move inward, revealing a secret chamber within. "That's High Nerd, right?" Annie said, and they walked through. Inside, the room was round and lined with books, but the main focus was a hole in the middle of the floor, surrounded by a copper barrier; a pole extended down, through the floor and to unknown regions below.

"Does he fight fires?" Mae asked.

"Hell if I know," Annie said.

"Where does it go?"

"As far as I can tell, it goes to Bailey's parking space."

Mae mustered no adjectives. "You ever go down?"

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

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

* * *

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

"It's what time?" Mae asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Everyone loves Annie," Josiah added.

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

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

Mae laughed, urged them on, and followed.

The rest of the day was a blur of glass rooms and brief, impossibly warm introductions. Everyone she met was busy, just short of overworked, but nevertheless thrilled to meet her, so happy she was there, any friend of Annie's . . . There was a tour of the health center, and an introduction to the dreadlocked Dr. Hampton who ran it. There was a tour of the emergency clinic and the Scottish nurse who did the admitting. A tour of the organic gardens, a hundred yards square, where there were two full-time farmers giving a talk to a large group of Circlers while they sampled the latest harvest of carrots and tomatoes and kale. There was a tour of the mini-golf area, the movie theater, the bowling alleys, the grocery store. Finally, deep in what Mae assumed was the corner of the campus—she could see the fence beyond, the rooftops of San Vincenzo hotels where visitors to the Circle stayed—they toured the company dorms. Mae had heard something about them, Annie mentioning that sometimes she crashed on campus and now preferred those rooms to her own home. Walking through the hallways, seeing the tidy rooms, each with a shiny kitchenette, a desk, an overstuffed couch and bed, Mae had to agree that the appeal was visceral.

"There are 180 rooms now, but we're growing quickly," Josiah said. "With ten thousand or so people on campus, there's always a percentage of people who work late, or just need a nap during the day. These

rooms are always free, always clean—you just have to check online to see which ones are available. Right now they book up fast, but the plan is to have at least a few thousand rooms within the next few years."

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

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