

*chapter fourteen*

WE FLEW over the Ebro River, into Aragon, and the plane seemed to gather force on descent, and there was Barajas by the sea. We banked gently towards the sun and I looked out my window on the left side of the plane at the mosaic city that, from above, washed in light, looked like shining white stones, and the taller mass of structures down Las Ramblas towards the water seemed like something made by a playful child. And there were the mountains that bound the city, the wrinkled hills scattered with sparse firs, the two rivers flanking Barcelona like winding roads in a field of dust.

To the north—or maybe it was east—I could make out the variegated green land that stretched to Andorra and into the Ebro Valley; soon the waters deepened into blue lakes and trees blanketed the hills.

There was a wildfire burning in the far hills and the smoke rose to the sky like the mist of a great waterfall, spreading and reaching for what seemed so many miles towards the horizon. I closed my eyes and tried to hold all that living light, take it all within my heart. I felt a kindling deep within me, the darkness burning and burning, lighting up, filling me with—alas, I cannot say.

I opened my eyes when I heard the landing gear come down.

Colin was asleep as we landed. In the golden morning light, there was

no sign of the impetigo. Through the light baby fat, he had a strong jaw-line, waning Caribbean tan, skin four shades shy of cinnamon. Our perfect, brown, chiseled baby boy.

He awoke easily and eagerly disembarked, and we eased through passport control, and I realized I hadn't taken my evening pill—nor had he—so while we waited for our bags I bought a bottle of Vichy Catalan and fished out the right doses and combinations from my carry-on and we swallowed them just as our bags came around the carousel, first off of the belt.

Even the most complex things change shape and become simple when you relocate yourself. Something about the overstimulation, the flood of new images and words, the feline sense of time. I turned on my phone, waited for it to pair with a local carrier; an email popped up from Arnaud. He said he could meet me in Barcelona if that was easiest. That seemed simple enough. Lunch at the hotel. An hour and a half only. I emailed him, suggesting tomorrow.

Outside, there was a line of black and yellow taxis at the curb. A man came out of one and took our bags, and I told him to take us to *el Hotel Arts, por favor.*

He looked at me in the rearview mirror, spent a second calculating, and started to fire true Castilian Spanish at me, which I couldn't follow, making out about every fifth word. He was my age, unshaven. It sounded thicker and more elegant than the Spanish in America.

Colin was looking at me smiling, expectant.

I said, “*Estamos de los Estados Unidos y tomamos un vacacion en Barcelona por la semana.*” Colin leaned across the seat and made a face at me like he had just seen a monkey shuffle cards.

“*Americano?*” he asked, smiling, his accent thinning, faintly American.

“Yes.”

“Daddy you speak *EspaÑol!*”

“I am from Seville. In Barcelona ten years. You like Barcelona? Have you been to Seville?”

I tried him again in Spanish. “*A mi me encanta Sevilla.*”

“The best city in Spain. But Barcelona is nice too. This is your son? You like *el futbol?*”

“Colin *futbol* is soccer.”

“Me? I like hockey. Where is Seville?”

“Ah, Sevilla! South of Spain. Andalucía, the soul of Spain.” He took his

right hand off the wheel and pointed down to signify south. He was wearing a red rubber band on his wrist that read "I Love Barcelona." He had a stack of brochures stuffed in beside the emergency brake.

Colin tapped me, asked how I knew Español, still holding a mild gaze of wonderment.

"Daddy lived here, you know that."

"You never talk about it."

"Amigo, you lived in Barcelona?"

"I was mainly in Madrid but I lived here for a short while when I moved to Spain."

"So, daddy, were you a bullfighter then?"

The driver and I laughed heartily. Colin seemed to catch on to the joke and began laughing too.

I looked out the window and started to experience *déjà vu*. It was early morning and the light had yet to spring on the city. The *La Vanguardia* newsstands, nearly every block, someone from an old building hosing off the pavement, scattering birds, balconies with French doors on every façade, and the tree-lined streets stretched on in a straight line. Barcelona was designed as a perfect grid of city blocks, except for the old city. He took us the long way, I wanted to see the heart of the Ciutat Vella. He started up to the La Plaza Cataluña, the grand center of the city at the top of Las Ramblas. The sidewalk tables at the Café Zurich were empty. There was a giant advertisement featuring Lionel Messi, Barcelona's star soccer forward, atop the building that could be seen a block away.

"Who is Messi?" Colin said.

"*Futbol, chico*. The best in Barcelona."

"He's the best player in the world. The Ovechkin of soccer. Only smaller," I said. Colin nodded and seemed to absorb that. The driver laughed and lit up a cigarette, rolling down his window with his left hand and using his smoking hand to drive.

We passed down Las Ramblas, a nearly mile-long thoroughfare that led all the way to the sea and splits the Gothic Quarter. Men were filling their flower stalls along the center promenade, bunches of sunflowers, rust chrysanthemums, tight-budded pink roses. There were a few street mimes out, enchanting a sparse crowd of tourists, no acrobats yet. But there was already a stream of people flowing up and down the great street. The plane trees had all shed their leaves but the bare branches on either side of Las

Ramblas arched and nearly touched. I was in a daze. I looked at the old buildings, recollecting the small, forgotten things, like how the street names are etched into marble slabs screwed into the corners of the buildings, how Barcelona has a distinct aroma, especially in the Barrio Gotico—mold and sea air and heat. I rolled down the window and there it was, unchanged, warm damp stones.

We passed La Boqueria, the enormous outdoor food market midway down the Ramblas and I looked at the trees, their creamy scaling bark. Originally, in 1703, they'd planted poplars. Without their leaves, the planes took on an irregular shape and reminded me of the tree branches in Van Gogh's *Garden in the Asylum*, willowy and domineering. I noticed it wasn't cold. I asked our driver about the weather. He said it was unseasonably warm, around twenty Celsius the past week. There were exhibition signs draped along the front of some historical buildings, English and Catalan, then Spanish.

Ahead, pointing east, was the vaunted Columbus statue and we completed the roundabout and rode north the Ronda Litoral, the old city to the west and the overhauled seafront to the east. They had torn much of the waterfront up for the '92 Olympics, planted palm trees where there had been *xiringuitos*, beach bars, and imported sand from Egypt to create a wide berth of beach. There were slums and the usual industrial eyesores; urban planners wisely, some say cruelly, swept it all away to build the most cosmopolitan of European seafronts. Barcelona, for a long time, was said to have its "back to the sea," but after the urban redesign of La Barceloneta, today it is said often by Catalans that Barcelona is open to the sea—and all the metaphors that this implies.

It wasn't the only way the city had been revised over the century. To stoke tourism, wealthy industrialists in the 1920s got the idea to build a Gothic Quarter in Barcelona. Historic buildings that were disassembled to make way for avenues like Via Laietana were put in storage. These stones were reused later in constructing the Barrio Gotico, from scratch, and this went on through the 1960s. It was a systematic urban improvisation, designed for aesthetics, less focused on historical fidelity. This was the way the Barcelona as we know it has been built: layer upon layer, stone by recycled stone—tear up a neighborhood and plant a cathedral. If you're from Barcelona, you're comfortable with the idea of history being perpetually revised. To be a Catalan is to be a revisionist.

We rode with the windows half open, breathing in the sea. The hotel was visible from far away. How could you miss something so spectacular? A blue tower with a white exoskeleton, the gleaming copper whale designed by Frank Gehry beside it, two icons in harmony at the very far end of the beach before the marina.

Colin climbed onto my lap to get a better look. Like the marina beside them, the hotel and sculpture were designed for the Olympics. It was now a Ritz-Carlton. We pulled up and three Anglo porters descended upon the car and doors opened. We were welcomed in English. I paid the driver, tipped him well. Colin tossed some pennies into the waterfall by the driveway.

“Come on,” I said, holding out my hand for his.

“What about our suitcases?”

“They bring those up to the room.”

A young British porter asked us about our flight as we rode the elevator to the lobby. He walked us to the front desk and wished us well. A French woman at reception told me we had been upgraded to a corner suite. I put down the credit card for deposit. She told us that the hotel had undergone recent renovations and that it now had a Michelin two-star restaurant on premises and if we would like she could plan for the two of us to eat there, which is hard to do if you’re not a guest of this hotel. I told her this was unnecessary. She seemed put off, but I told her I had an important lunch meeting tomorrow and could she recommend another more casual place, and she said the hotel had a lovely pool terrace restaurant, La Terraza, and would I like to plan for that, and I said yes, for two, at one o’clock please. Colin was watching me and smiling, as if this was all theater.

Colin could swim within sight. Maybe I would need a sitter, just to monitor him. I said this under my breath to the woman as she typed. She looked up, made uncomfortably long eye contact, and said loudly that she would be pleased to arrange for a babysitter for this afternoon for two hours. Did I realize I was past the cancellation window? Yes, I did. It would total two hundred euro, inclusive of tax and gratuity. Colin had a squeamish expression. I explained the situation. It was just for an hour, I said.

“Daddy who is your lunch with? Why can’t I come?”

“It’s a work thing,” I said, the elevator doors closing. “Push thirty-three.”

We shot up to our floor without stopping.

“But I thought you weren’t the boss anymore? Your new job is me?”

I thought about that and made some calculations. There was no clear

answer. “You are my new job, and this is for you, in a way.” He didn’t seem satisfied. We walked out of the elevator.

“If you’re good then I’ll take you shopping for a present.”

He held a blank stare and played some game with his feet where he tried not to touch the edges on the carpeting. It could not be medicated away. Not everything we suffer can be eradicated completely.

At the end of the long bright hall we reached a tall door. I handed him the key card. He slid it in a few times in the wrong direction. This made him giggle. I took it from him, reversed the direction, handed it back, and he slid it in again and it clicked.

Our room was overly spacious, a view of the sea from the bedroom, and from the living room a vista of the entire city, the Sagrada Família rising, decadent and grotesque, a century plus in the making. There were two flat screens and two bathrooms, one of them the size of his bedroom at home.

“This is amazing!” he yelled from the shower, running into the sitting room and back into the bedroom, opening the minibar door, turning on the stereo, turning on all the lights and pushing every button he could reach. A recording of Spanish guitar, assuredly Antonio De Lucena, began to play. “We have a refrigerator with snacks! And look, free chocolate!”

I let him ransack the room like this for a while. What was the harm in letting a child dismantle the perfection of a five-star hotel room? Someone would invisibly appear just before dusk and put it all in order again, fluff the pillows and dial in the mood music.

“Colin, come here, buddy. Let’s talk about the plan!” I was deciding between the gorgeous Gaudí cathedral, the agate silver sea, the Ciutat Vella, and Gaudí’s twisting spires stretching to the sky, a city walled in by the verdant Serra de Collserola.

We showered and changed, took a taxi into the city, got out near the Liceu, and walked into the Barrio Gotico, got ourselves lost on purpose, walking for nearly half an hour. The morning air was still fresh.

I had agreed to meet Carmen and Jordi, her son, at eleven o’clock in la Placa de Catalunya. Colin and I rambled around the shops, walked with a light meal of bocadillos of jamón serrano, and when it was close to the time, we walked up Las Ramblas, which was thick with tourists, and he touched the flowers in the stalls as we walked past. I bought a *Vanguardia* and we got a nice table outside at Café Zurich and sat down, ordered a coffee and soda, and watched the people exit the metro and mosey into the city.

At eleven fifteen, when she still hadn't come, I grew nervous; I had left my phone in the hotel. It occurred to me she might not recognize me, and although our table was prominently located, I stood nonetheless for almost ten minutes so she could be sure to catch a glimpse of me. Before long I saw Carmen waving near the payphone by the metro exit. She was walking furiously, knowingly late, in high heels. Jordi was Colin's size. He waved to us too, even though he had never met us. They squeezed through the neighboring tables and, without a word, Carmen kissed both my cheeks and did the same to Colin. She was taller than I remembered. I shook Jordi's hand. He said "nice to meet you" in perfect English.

"You look *maravilloso, guapo*," she said.

"So do you. Thank you for seeing us. I'm really excited."

She was slightly overdressed, but this was Spain, and I did not mind her jasmine perfume.

"And you are feeling okay? The jetlag is not so bad? Can we walk? You are hungry, no?"

I smiled, answered none of her questions, left a heap of euro coins on the table, and we strolled back down Las Ramblas, Carmen eventually leading us down the narrow streets, through archways, along stone walls with history and minimal graffiti, and somewhere—could have been anywhere in this maze—church bells tolled. The streets at times were as tight as alleys, just a slit of sky; it was hard to make out the true time. There were swarms of tourists pouring in from the Via Laietana and Carrer dels Capellans by the Barcelona Cathedral, the horde drinking Cuba Libres in the Plaça Reial, with its palm lined arcade.

It was too easy to get lost in the Gothic Quarter. Find some place spectacular once off a main street and write it down—you may never see it again.

Finally, we reached the Plaça del Pi. We sat at one of the open tables at what Carmen said was a recommended café and ordered cortados. I looked up and saw the high walls of the Santa Maria del Pi, a fine example of Catalan Gothic, a style stripped of adornments, and there were pigeons on the rose window above the entrance, and the bells rang out again, startling the pigeons away.

The square was mainly locals and couples, a scattering of middle-aged men smoking alone; it was a place outside the tourist realm, even though it was only a brief walk from the Ramblas. It is one of my favorite spots in

Barcelona. Jordi and Colin ran to kick a stray soccer ball over by the church walls. Carmen lit a cigarette and passed it to me. We watched the boys play for a while and then she looked at me for a long time and said nothing. I asked her how Antonio was liking his new position. For some reason, she answered me in Spanish, Catalan-inflected accent. I heard her say that he preferred Madrid. I tried to answer her back and then she took the cigarette from me, put on fresh lipstick and laughed skyward, and we watched the boys chase away a freshly landed flock of pigeons, kicking the ball through the birds and laughing too. She was a woman who darted in and out of life's currents; she was hard to resist in her four fluent languages. I finished my cortado and signaled the waiter and ordered us another. I heard Colin scream in pleasure, his voice rising to the bell tower where it echoed. She lit me another cigarette and borrowed from it.

"You will like Ariadna." She was smoking, watching me, flicking ashes sideways.

"Who?"

"The sister of Ferran, the gallery owner. We will meet her this afternoon."

I did not answer. I understood now what this was, for her. I failed to conceal my unhappiness. This trip was to honor Monica. I had not planned on Carmen crop-dusting me with blind dates, especially with far away Catalan women. Colin ran over to me, sweating and smelling of wet pennies.

"Can I buy a soccer ball too, please?"

"Sure, we can grab one in a little bit." He ran back at the pigeons.

Carmen must have sensed my displeasure because she tried to change the subject with food. She told the waiter she wanted *albondigas* and *croquetas* and asked me if I'd like an order of *pa amb tomàquet*. It was nearly noon. I vaguely grunted yes. This meant we'd be staying another hour. Chances were, Ariadna looked like every other Catalan woman, slightly Anglo, skinny from all the coffee and nicotine, that one big lunch per day. I had never known a Spanish woman, or any other women since Monica. Except Mimi. At forty, I was malformed, unfit for another person. We conform to who we love, and if we love them enough no other person can conform to us, like a key fitting into a specialty lock.

The waiter left and returned quickly with utensils wrapped in paper napkins, and he spoke something to Carmen in dense Catalan that I didn't comprehend. She said something and he came back minutes later with a bottle of Priorat and some Diet Cokes for the boys. He uncorked the bottle,

poured her a taste and she said something, and he smiled broadly, said something back, then began to laugh for a good thirty seconds, showing his yellow teeth, and retreated to the café.

I decided to let it go and be gracious. “I appreciate your consideration, Carmen. But I am not *soltero*. I still feel married. It’s not right.”

“Of course you do. You are a good man. Your heart is pure. But you have a big heart, enough love for two. She would not wish for you to live with these canvases, which is why you brought them to me. They are hers and they inhabit you. You cannot inhabit them. When one dies, it is this way. You are stuck on their canvas for a while. Then God says to us we must move on, expand the canvas. This is what you must do, Mark, expand your canvas.”

“But I’m already stretched and framed,” I said, hoping a little sarcasm might stall this conversation.

She leaned across the table, practically out of her seat, and said, “Then break the frame!”

“We don’t even live here.”

Carmen was smiling as she was inhaling the cigarette. She passed it back to me. I inhaled so heavily I broke into a fit of coughing. We both laughed.

“You Americans,” she said, “always planning everything.”

“It’s why we are number one,” I said.

“And it’s why you take so many pills and your people are so miserable.” She was smiling and took a deep sip of the wine. She was unaware of my own regimen, so I didn’t take offense.

“It’s why your unemployment rate is ten percent.”

“Man plans and God laughs,” she said, blowing me a kiss.

I tasted the wine. It was strong and had a concentrated flavor of plums and tar. “Well, I cannot argue with God.” We clinked glasses and took another sip.

“No, you cannot.” She kept her glass raised for a toast. “To the future, you handsome devil.”

“*El futuro*,” I said.

The waiter returned with the food, a plate of bread sliced lengthwise and covered in tomato puree and garlic, and casseroles of fried cheese croquets and lamb meatballs. Carmen was quick to mention she had made us a reservation at El Quatre Gats, to signal that this didn’t constitute lunch. This being Spain, the entire day would revolve around food. The phone rang and she lifted one of the meatballs with a toothpick and held it while

she spoke to Ferran, who, from what I could make out, said the paintings had arrived yesterday. I heard Colin scream again, and looked over, and Jordi was on the ground, a failed attempt at blocking a shot. Colin's arms were raised. Then a startle. The bells began to toll again. The birds lifted off the rim of the bell tower. They rang and rang, and Carmen couldn't hear any longer so she had to hang up. I drank the wine and ate the bread, dipping it in the garlicky sauce, waved Colin over to have some of the bread too. The bells rang on. I saw an elderly couple stand and waltz, laughing. It was noon.

Jordi came over too, and the kids devoured the food. The bells stopped, the birds returned. Carmen lit up another. I declined.

"Who's that?" said Jordi.

A man with a giant backpack had appeared, something mounted on his back. I held my stare. Others began to turn too. It looked heavy and tall, semi-globe-shaped at the top, the unmistakable shine of a lens. A camera encased in plastic guards. He was holding a map and walking, just a backpack and this device. Carmen called him a *gilipollas*, dickhead. We watched him trace the perimeter of the *placa*, then cross it, point to point, diagonally. Then he stood in the center, spun 360 degrees, until he caught the street view. The kids ran over and followed him. He wore a plaid shirt and gray cargo pants. He turned to them and I caught a glimpse of his face, softly bearded and unmistakably American, around twenty-five. What a gig. Get paid to walk Barcelona all day for Google Earth—I assumed it was them—so that we can beam ourselves back to Barcelona when you are home, encased in a blizzard, or wherever you wished to go, flitting to and fro around the globe, a Peter Pan visiting Anthony Bourdain places.

"They do this all the time here now," she said. "The satellites won't get the streets right. They must walk. To come in uninvited."

"He seems harmless. It's just a summer job."

"Mark, it's November. Like this all year long."

Invasion of the maps. A small crowd had gathered, gawking at the alien thing affixed to his back, a good nine feet high. The young man seemed unafraid of the stares. The pack seemed heavy. He had an empty water bottle, upside down in the side pocket. Do they ever stop? Does this go on for hours, days? Does he get health insurance from the digital barons for whom he's harvesting data? The faces were blurred at street level view to protect privacy. Carmen said *gilipollas* again.

The boys were talking to the man. He couldn't really lean over because of the pack. They shook hands. Colin ran back over to me.

"Daddy! Jerome's from America! And he's hungry! Can we give him something? Please!"

Before I could say no, he grabbed some of the *pa amb tomàquet* and scrambled back to Jerome. Carmen was primed for an outburst. She signaled the waiter. She pointed at Jerome and then the waiter began to use the word *gilipollas* too, nodding furiously, and I didn't have to eavesdrop on their rapid, heated Spanish to gleam the consensus of injustice that *los lobos de Silicon Valley* were bringing their war of information to the streets of Barcelona. They were talking, facing Jerome, who had folded the bread and was eating hastily. This seemed to inflame them further. The waiter turned, waved his hand in disgust at Jerome. Carmen looked at me and rolled her eyes.

"They are here all the time now. The last year the most. For us, it is very distressing."

Carmen was setting down euros and thick coins, hustling us out.

"It's just a camera. Haven't you ever used Google Earth?"

"So I can see the Eiffel Tower, Las Sagrada Familia, The Empire State? Do we need to know everything, own it visually? What is the point? What is the point of life if we know everything? What happens when we take away all the mystery?"

*Scroll up to the see the church, down to look at the ancient cobblestones.* I imagined someone like Lars or Alan, profiteering off this, not on the images but on the web traffic, eyeballs, and how they jacked up the advertising rates, the exodus of ad buys from broadsheets, the AM show on the morning commute, Alan at his sink in his silk robe.

I asked her how far to the gallery. She said twenty minutes by foot. Everyone in Spain was always on foot, and it was always twenty minutes to somewhere.

We walked down the Carrer de l'Ave Maria for less than a minute, Jerome in tow, mapping. I dropped back and told him it was nice he could see the city this way. He had a few days of stubble, bloodshot eyes; as a Google Trekker he could pay off his graduate school loans at Pepperdine. He had seen all of Europe this way for several months, alone. It was always like this: on foot, all day, sleep at youth hostels. It was a rig of fifteen cameras at five megapixels each, a frame shot every two seconds to render a

panoramic view. Software pieced the fragments together, a coder drafting algorithms to improve the resolution. You stand on London Bridge, swivel and see the Thames.

Carmen wouldn't look at him. Jerome walked eventually walked ahead of me and disappeared down a side street.

Up ahead, Colin and Jordi were cupping their hands to windows, running into open shops and racing out. Carmen languished in accusatory silence for a while, mainly because I was an American too.

We passed a group of Canadians with their maple leaf flag stitched on their backpacks. A Scandinavian teetering on a rusted bike.

"What else will you do in Barcelona?" The shared silence had been a tonic that dissolved the bonds of me to Jerome, the cameras, California, the virus of digitalization writ large.

"There is no plan. I've lived inside one for too long. Only to enjoy Spain."

"That is a kind of plan, a good plan. Doing nothing is doing something."

"I suppose so."

"You know I am right. You came here for reason, a man with the money to go anywhere. You look tired, honestly. Do you remember why Monica would go to Mexico?"

I held quiet.

"She needed that nothing space. The mind must open up. It cannot open up under tension. An artist needs room, to roam, to learn, to see."

"I wish I had let her open the gallery there."

"You did not want it?"

"It seemed like an extravagance. I was jealous. She was an artist, I was not. Such a price." I said the last part under my breathe.

Carmen watched my face. I realized people were always trying to read my face. People were always trying to leap the barricades of intimacy.

We spoke more about her life with Antonio, who she loved deeply, and Jordi who had just been diagnosed with dyslexia and was struggling in school. I told her a sanitized version of Colin's challenges. To unburden yourself to another human being is necessary if you do not want those burdens to calcify and harden you. She said Jordi was taking a pill too for his anxiety.

I heard a guitarist. This area of the Barrio Gotico seemed vaguely familiar, but then again so did much of Barcelona, even though I was had mainly

been a regular visitor here while I was living in Madrid. We turned down the Carrer Princesa, then quickly onto a narrow street immediately with a luxe chocolate shop at the corner. The boys peered in the window. They were begging us to go in, but the shop owner was locking up for lunch break.

*“Otro?”* She was holding a newly lit cigarette.

Why not? I smoked out in the open in what were likely unmapped streets, Colin up ahead. I thought of the effective rum from two weeks ago and wondered if the Priorat wasn’t better. From what I could infer from the available sky down in the labyrinthine streets, the sun was nearing its height. Always a tyranny of blue in Spain. There wasn’t any heat, but it was mild enough for me to take off my blazer and walk with it slung from my finger over my shoulder. We smoked and walked for another ten minutes until we were there.

“Okay, you need this now,” Carmen said, handing me a mint. I took it. She appraised me and adjusted my collar. I put on my blazer.

There was one large window and you could see a mild commotion inside. Colin waded over in a hush. One of those rickety European mopeds came zipping by, full speed, blistering our solitude, then Ferran looked up and saw us and waved.

I could sense the paintings, perhaps already hung inside.

Carmen led me in, Ferran holding back as our presence settled into the space.

“Colin are you ready to see the paintings?” I said. He held my hand, nodded, leaned against my arm all sweaty.

We walked inside and the space had the scent of new construction; while the single entrance gave the sense of a confined space, clearly they had purchased and gutted the neighboring buildings, and it felt like SOHO with its highceilings and blonde hardwood, then again most everything about Barcelona was done in genuflection to autonomy and experimentation.

At first, I couldn’t spot her work. I was struck by several notable pieces hung prominently: a lithograph by Frank Stella, varying abstract shapes; an original Picasso etching, female nude, limited edition; in the corner, by the old fireplace, a Victor Vasarely; and an artist I didn’t know, John Opper, who, per Google, turned out to be a Chicago acolyte of Hans Hoffman from the 1950s, red and orange blocks in near primary colors, like a Rothko turned sideways. He had showed in The Betty Parsons Gallery, Ferran said, after 1947, when Peggy Guggenheim had closed her gallery doors for good

and returned to Europe. And right near those large, recognizable FedEx boxes from America were two Jasper Johns', color etching and acquaint, and an abstract composition by the great Catalan painter Joan Miró, lithograph signed in pencil by the artist. The room was beautifully laid out, lit in tungsten halogen. Emptiness punctuated by color. I saw Ariadna looking at me, bent over and slicing the tape on the boxes, letting Colin and me take it in. Over the past few days I had spent time wandering the gallery's website, trying to penetrate some unseen core, but no number of keystrokes can unmask the essence of a place.

*Il faut aller voir.*

I couldn't see how Monica's realist oeuvre would immediately fit in among so much avant-garde work. Sensing my unease, Ferran came over and reassured me that he wanted the pieces. I played at my reluctance, as I didn't wish to leave Monica's artistic ashes somewhere she wasn't truly wanted. He was insistent, to the point of taking my hands and invoking unnecessary eye contact in that unabashed Spanish way. It was so forward I thought he might start stroking my cheek. He led me by the hand to the boxes; he had slit open the tops but had yet to remove the paintings. Carmen wandered over and tapped her hand on my back. Colin and Jordi ran over from the other Picasso litho.

"Which one is it?" he said, still breathing heavily.

I grabbed the mammoth gold leaf frame and lifted the 38x32 oil on canvas from its box: *Boy on Beach, Nantucket*. Of course, while they had seen pictures of this already, Carmen and Ferran gushed, whether for my benefit or out of genuine admiration I couldn't tell, but they audibly gasped with each canvas I slid from the box, neorealist stills of places from Monica's life. We all stood silent, as if stargazing, for a long time, letting the paintings work their way inside us, lush and nearly flood lit. They contrasted beautifully on the wall below the surrealism of Miró, a yin and yang of form.

"Daddy, it's weird. They look different. Kind of new."

"It's the light. This room has perfect light. We were looking at these in our basement. Not the same."

"They are perfect depictions of place," said Ariadna.

I was so engrossed I thought it was Monica's voice in my head, which I had not heard in a week. I looked up. She was standing behind Carmen, deep in a canvas, eyes down maybe out of respect. I had assumed she had been standing there for a while, since the first canvas had been lifted back

into this world ten minutes ago. She saw me looking at her but held her gaze. She was petite. I put her around thirty-five. When she finally did look up, she made long eye contact. She seemed the type of woman with a repertoire of expressions.

“Where will you hang these?” I said, looking at Ferran.

“Over here.”

He led us to a long wall behind the Opper.

“We can fit all eight here. I will hang them today. You can come to the party tomorrow?”

“I did not mention the party.” Carmen turned to me. “Mark it is just cocktails, very small. To honor Monica.”

“Can we go?” Colin shouted.

“Very small, nothing fancy,” Ferran said.

“It sounds lovely.” I looked at Ariadna. She was looking at the beach painting.

“Can Jordi come? Also, do I need a suit?”

They all laughed.

“Yes, Jordi can come and you can wear whatever you like,” Carmen said.

“Hard to find a suit but maybe a new shirt, what do you say?” I said.  
“You don’t need help hanging these?”

“My sister does them.” Ferran nodded towards Ariadna. For the first time, I noted she was holding a hammer. “I buy, she sells—hangs and sells. We are a team.”

“But this is your gallery, I am just a lowly Catalan girl who works here.” They laughed again. They had done this before, this shtick. She had zero Spanish accent, sounded faintly British.

“It is not the truth. I am the boss man here. But we all follow Ariadna.”

Colin was looking up at her.

\*

WHEN ALL the paintings were hung, we took a taxi back to the hotel. It was nearly six o’clock, and we were both exhausted. Carmen kissed us goodbye on both cheeks, Ferran gave me *un abrazo*, a hug, and Ariadna kissed Colin on the cheek. He was in a jetlagged daze in the hotel room, fluttering in and out of consciousness. I ordered us cheeseburgers from room service. He ate his into a half moon shape and then asked for a bath before putting on his

pajamas and climbing into bed with me. I had left the curtains open and all the evening light from the city and the seaside poured in. I was still hungry and took some dark chocolate from the minibar. Carmen texted. What did I think? I knew what she was asking. I told her the paintings looked beautiful, thank you, and I would see her *mañana* after my lunch with Arnaud. She texted back immediately and said Ferran was very happy and impressed with me and Ariadna was too. The party was early tomorrow, *a las siete de la tarde*, please dress nicely.

Colin was half asleep, covered in a sheet. I switched off the nightstand light, and lay in silence for a while, near sleep. I felt him tap my arm.

*Daddy*

*Huh*

*Are you happy*

*What*

*Happy. Are you*

*Sure I'm with you*

*I mean overall*

*Sure*

*But you were the boss and now*

*I'm tired. Go to sleep*

*Don't you miss being the boss*

*No go to sleep*

*Are you lonely*

*Jesus, Colin*

*But I don't see you on dates*

*Daddy is married*

*You are soltero*

*What*

*Spanish for single*

*So what*

*So you need to have fun and I like Ariadna*

*Colin please*

*She is nice and she likes you*

*She is soltero*

*She is and she has pretty eyes*

*Maybe you should date her*

*Hey*

*Ow don't kick me little man*

*Don't tease*

*Go to bed*

*I cant it's the lag*

*Jet lag*

*Yes jet lag*

*I am happy*

*Okay*

*And glad I'm not the boss*

*Okay*

\*

I HAD fallen asleep in my clothes beside Colin, outside the sheets. My mouth was parched. I got up, took and uncapped an orange juice from the minibar, and squinted at the Mediterranean light. I turned and Colin wasn't there, a cold indentation on the pillow.

I felt a panic. What if he'd gotten the notion to go for a walk or a swim on the beach or a stroll down the pick-pocket infested Ramblas? I thought to check the living room, and when I opened the door I was astonished: he was asleep on the couch, the TV on the Disney Channel, an order from room service set up on the coffee table. It was seven-thirty in the morning. There were half-eaten scrambled eggs and bacon; there was an order for me too, under the plate cover, semi-warm. I looked for signs of when he had woken. On the bill was an order for pastries, and the basket was untouched beside the TV. I looked at the room service menu: the kitchen opened at five-thirty a.m. On the tray was an empty orange juice, a white orchid blossom in a tiny jar, a cold espresso.

He was snoring and drooling on the pillow. Nothing but his boxers. I grabbed a blanket from the other room and covered him, switched off the TV, and sat down on the other end of the sectional and ate the lukewarm eggs and crisp bacon, watching the spires of the Sagrada Familia gradually brighten in the morning sun. This was the best and most useless time in Spain, the soft shapeless early morning, all the country still in a slumber. I went into the bedroom and made myself a hot espresso in the little machine with the capsules, Big Coffee, by the minibar and came back and watched the hues shift on the cathedral, gold to whiskey, brass to orange. The sky

was already very blue, a feathering of clouds near the peak of Tibidabo, and I turned and watched a skiff ride through the harbor and eventually out to sea.

A child sees everything and knows nothing. That he read me so openly the night before was frightening. No one wants to be read: as humans, we prefer to be a mystery to each other, above all, to ourselves.

Arnaud surely knew I would get bored and would miss being the boss. Hawthorne suspected, too, that I might find emeritus life dull. But my fear and despair from home had been diminished in Barcelona. Certain places make us better. We tire, maybe, of our patterns, and so when we thrive in the microclimates of other places, rousing our dormant cells, we think it means we're better suited to live in that place. Maybe that's true. But I didn't need to dwell upon Dr. Weller for long to hear what he would say: First, we inhabit ourselves.

I suddenly felt compelled to walk back into the bedroom and grab my notebook, a hotel pen from the desk, another espresso. I thought I should shower first, instead. I skipped a shower and wrote a journal entry for a while on the sofa, by hand, Colin's feet nearly on my leg. I was back in Italy with Monica, but it didn't make sense for her to be Monica anymore in the story. I changed her name to Veronica, played Gaudi with her identity, put curls in her hair, more song in her voice. That was it. She was a first chair violinist. I placed us in Vienna. She was in the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra. *Das Wiener Philharmoniker*. She played first chair and she was Slovak. Maybe we met on the slopes in Gstaad, where I spend a winter writing my novel. I would be *soltero*. A world-class violinist cannot ski, but she can *aprés-ski*. We met at The Alpina, she was dressed all in white and sat by the hearth drinking a Bitter Diablerets with cola. Hoof sounds in the snow, the sleigh ascending the slopes into the evergreen night, very little said, at first. There were too many languages in Europe to be completely given over to one. She tried to address me in German. It was useful to know a smattering of each, my character said, as the horses panted. I went on like this, for maybe an hour, ignoring my surroundings—forgetting it, really... more the right word. Colin barely rustled. I got so far as her invitation to me to hear her play Bruckner's seventh symphony in Wien when I felt a sense of depletion. I looked out at the sea again: the skiff was gone. There were sailboats now, bending and leaning into the wind. A man was already stretched out on a towel on the beach tanning. The sea produced no roily

surf. I looked out at the city. The light had ignited Barcelona. Pedestrians and cars were mildly visible, even from the thirty-third floor. I loved this city. Maybe I was better here. First, we inhabit ourselves. Maybe the places we love are really hidden selves crying out.

I woke him close to eleven. He dressed quickly, grabbing toast from his half-eaten breakfast, eager to get going with our day. We rode the elevator down to the teeming lobby. All the floral arrangements looked brand new, canted yellow tulips in square glass bowls beside a stack of *International New York Times*.

We waited a bit in the lounge. I had my hand on his shoulder. “It’s only an hour, then we can hang, okay, promise, okay?”

The girl the concierge had scheduled for the hour was blowing bubbles in spandex leggings, small pink purse slung over her shoulder. She did not smile. She couldn’t have been twenty.

He sat down on the sofa nearly crying, only withholding tears because we were in a public place. I began to wonder if the lunch was a good idea at all. What was the point? I had an anemic nest egg in the low millions. It was impulse—and vanity—that led me to respond to Arnaud at Dulles. I didn’t need to write back that day; I could have taken the week. Was I not learning? At best, it was a ten thousand a month gig. I had no desire to be the CEO of Publicis America.

I was angry at the concierge for such a low-grade babysitter. Even at the Ritz, I was just another American guest in a long line of needy tourist requests with their demands and mandates. The babysitter must have sensed my displeasure with the whole situation. I can take him now, if you like, maybe to the pool, she said. Yes, the pool. I would not look at her. Then I can watch him, I thought. I handed her the room key and told her where to find his suit, which I had forgotten. He walked off to the elevator bank before I could say goodbye.

I walked up to La Terraza early and requested a private table. The waiter placed me in the shade with a clear view of the pool. I sat with my back to the open kitchen; Colin was wading in the shallow end, looking back up at me. I waved. He didn’t wave back. I ordered a lemonade and the waiter returned with a Tom Collins glass of large ice, a sprig of rosemary, a little carafe of lemonade he poured ceremoniously. I sipped it and watched the boats rock, Ibiza and Mallorca, mirages in the distance. I had ten minutes until our appointment. I looked at the other tables. Couples and families.

The women lunching beside me ordered banana smoothies and egg white frittatas. There was a gentle breeze.

Colin was looking up at me from the pool—he had his hand over his brow like a visor. The girl was slumped on a chaise, checking her phone. He had found a tennis ball and was throwing it into the deep end, swimming and fetching it, throwing it back. He repeated this game for a while.

The sun glinted off the pool water. Even in late fall, the Mediterranean light could burn. I realized that I had not instructed the girl to apply any sunscreen. From behind me, at the maître d' booth, I heard a man's voice, a French accent. There was no time left now to go to the pool and come back. I stood up and turned: it was Arnaud, already with his hand extended, that big chairman's smile broadcasting his good intent for our lunch and the years to come. Before I could pull away he placed his other hand on mine, a double-hander, putting me entirely in his grip. He wore a pastel pink shirt and dark blue tie, light gray suit, white pocket square—however the bankers dress in Monaco. He looked younger than the picture on his bio page, perhaps some injections. He had a perfect hairline, lustrous gray hair, offset by black rimmed glasses. I felt woefully underdressed in khakis, white linen shirt, and a navy blazer, the penny loafers I wore to walk Atticus in the summer.

"Mr. White, it is such a pleasure, a true pleasure. Hawthorne has told us so much." He smiled and had a fortress of perfectly white front veneers. His accent had suddenly vanished, sanitized away now that he was down to business.

I deepened my voice, stayed standing a touch longer as he began to sit, and, glancing at Colin, said I was eager to learn more about the position. That last word lingered like a misplayed note. He seemed to notice.

I sat and sipped the lemonade, trying to play it off. Suddenly, I recognized that I had been nervous, a sparrow flutter in the back of the throat. It felt ridiculous to be nervous. For ten years, as Mark White, I gave orders, I had vendors, people who lined up to be in my employ. I had no superior. Why was I nervous? The sun had shifted, a slant of light across our table. Colin was playing his game. I saw Arnaud watching me watch him.

"You brought your boy; you are a good man."

"Do you have any kids?"

He laughed and studied his iced tea. "I am a bachelor, no kids, the only one in Paris. I am sixty-five. In some sense, we have things in common."

“Maybe so.”

“Do not worry. I won’t pry. But I prefer to be direct. It saves money but also prevents mistakes, which cost money. So, you had some problems, sold to Hawthorne. It is good for you both, but it is a problem for Publicis in the sense that now we have no plan to build in America.”

I glanced back at Colin and remembered the time I feel asleep in Mallorca and awoke to badly burned legs, the kind of burn that produced blisters and a fever.

“Arnaud, I’m eager to speak with you. Truly. But would you mind if I just checked in with my son—the heat, no sunscreen. Just five minutes.”

I stood up so quickly it bumped the table and almost knocked over the lemonade. He had no opportunity to respond except to partially stand, an empty smile on his face.

I nearly ran down to the pool. “Throw me the ball,” I said to Colin. The girl put down her phone when she saw me.

“Aren’t you supposed to be at your stupid meeting?” he said.

“Toss it to me.”

He walked over towards the shallow end where he could stand and pitched it to me hard. I had to leap to catch it, arm outstretched. It was an angry throw. I asked the girl in Spanish if he might want to go down to the beach just outside the pool but she responded to me that it was windy and there were too many gypsies. I tried to tell her in Spanish that I’d like her to take him down for a few minutes when my lunch started but I wasn’t sure exactly what I was saying. He was studying me.

“Do you want some gelato?”

“Seriously?” he said.

“Yeah, seriously. They have a gelato bar right by the drinks area. Seriously, come on.”

He pushed himself out of the pool and raced over to the gelato cart. The girl stayed seated. He ordered two scoops of chocolate and I ordered vanilla. We shared a chaise and ate the gelato in the sun, letting the negative sediment of moments ago settle and dissolve. I heard the barman turn on the blender and watched him pour two strawberry daiquiris, topped with whipped cream, and a waiter in white carried them to an Italian couple frolicking in the deep end.

“What are those?”

“Alcoholic drinks.”

He was licking the inside of his cup.

“You know what? I want to try black rice with squid.” His mouth was dark ringed with gelato.

“What?” I sat back and appraised him. He was standing on the pool deck, unconsciously semi-flexing.

“That’s big boy food, you serious?” I thought about trying to find some wild five-table place in La Barceloneta, some not listed in Zagat’s. I thought of the thin long rice, tar black from squid ink, the creamy texture from the garlic aioli mixed in. They called it fideuá.

“Completely serious. They showed it on the hotel TV this morning. I searched it up, it sounds good. So, can we?”

“Well, hard to argue with that. Let me do this one lunch, then we can go right after, okay?”

I looked at Colin’s stone smooth shoulders, bronzing in the light. For a little boy, he had bulk already. For a man, to be strong and physically perfect was a gift. I wondered how he would use this as he grew older. How much more was he aware of my nuances than I was aware of myself? I told the girl to fetch the sunblock lotion from the pool reception. She got up and returned with a small tray of bottles and sprays, American brands, and I grabbed the pink one, shook it, and squirted some pasty cream on his shoulders and massaged it in.

“Is this man the boss?”

“He is.” I wiped the excess lotion on his palms and told him to do his chest and arms.

“And he wants you to be a new boss for him.”

“Sort of.”

“Because you’re bored with me.”

“Colin! No. That is not true. This is a consulting thing, do you understand that? Part-time.”

He spun the ball in his hand.

“It’s just,” he broke off, starting to cry. “It’s just, well, I am bored too, always by myself.”

“Well you have friends, you have Tommy!”

He was crying but not loudly yet. “I meant my parents. I’m bored being alone. I want you Dad, okay!” The barman turned and looked.

“Colin.”

“What!”

“Can you be calm?”

“Why?”

“So daddy can do this meeting, this one single meeting then it’s over.”

“Then what?”

“Then we are together all week.”

“So.”

“So, I promise. I will even get you a souvenir.”

“I want black rice.”

“Okay, black rice.”

“And a Messi hat.”

“Okay, they don’t make hats but you can get a jersey.”

“Fine. How long?”

“Thirty minutes.”

He took a taste of the melted gelato and dove in the pool, my signal to get the hell out.

Arnaud barely stood when I returned to our table. He took an extra few seconds to complete an email on his phone. I sat and waited. I drank another lemonade. I could hear the blender from up here. Once Arnaud hung up, the waiter materialized and took our orders.

Arnaud switched on his chairman’s charm and dispensed with whatever animosity he harbored against me for visiting with Colin.

“Hawthorne said you were a good father.”

“Well, I have my bad days.” I realized I was nervous not so much because of who he was but because I didn’t know exactly who I was supposed to be at this lunch. I wasn’t the boss. This confused and distressed me, for the first time, sitting with the head of a \$10-billion company eating American food in a Spanish restaurant watching my son play Sisyphus with a tennis ball in the pool. How many more revolutions around the sun must we journey until we learn what is best for us?

“Why did you come to Barcelona? I’m just curious.”

“I needed a change of scenery. We both did. I know you’re aware of my circumstances. Sometimes, a change can be bad, sometimes it can—just like this rosemary in my lemonade. Magic.”

“Yes, but why here?” He was smiling, unbroken eye contact, and seemed to be relishing my little story.

“Spain is a kind of home. I don’t have to learn how to do things here. I know how to do things here. That’s not true if I visit Paris or London.”

“Do you always have to travel so far to find home?”

I realized he was playing a game, trying to stress test my emotional well-being to see how I held up, if I might fall asleep or break down or send out some crazy Trump tweets. I would hold up. He was waiting for me to get drunk, to stammer on live TV. He summoned the waiter and ordered a glass of rosé, and I figured he wanted to see if I took one too. I demurred. He insisted. I said no. He seemed pleased and repeated his question.

“I’ve lived in Washington forever. I guess it feels stale. One misses the spectacle of Europe.”

“And you are well known.”

“So what?”

“Mr. White, I’m just trying to get to know you, the ways you think about life. It’s no secret who you are and what your company—your former company—has been through. We are still attracted to it, to you. I’m am eager to get to know you to understand if you can help us.”

Arnaud, by now, had put his elbows on the table, clasped his hands, rested his mouth at the peak of that triangle. One might have thought he was flaunting his diamond cufflinks, but I had seen this affectation a lot from the very wealthy; it is meant to feign serious interest, their listening posture, they hold it briefly, take in what they need from you, make their sales pitch, and then they’re out. At this point, I knew this would be a thirty-minute lunch. But what he wanted to know from me I did not yet know of myself.

“It’s poetic, the sea. You chose an exceptional property,” he said.

“This is a special city. I guess I wanted him to see it the right way.”

“And he’s enjoying it?”

“I think so.” I held the silence to force him to scrub ahead to his point quickly.

“Well, congratulations again on your decision. I’m sure it wasn’t easy. But you have handed it over to someone very capable, as I am sure you well know. We at Publicis, unfortunately, are not in a great position in America. We have made acquisitions that have not panned out. We have made big hires, still,” he let go of his hands and opened them, indicating a vanishing, “nothing. We need someone experienced to counsel us. This is not a full-time assignment. I’d say...six months, \$250,000. Not a lot for a man of your stature, but who knows where this can lead. We need someone to give us a roadmap, names, ideas, advise us so we don’t buy yet another firm that runs through our fingers like all that sand out there.”

He stopped and waited. He knew what he was doing. Make a concise and attractive pitch and see if I bite before the food is served. If I say yes, he can shade in the contours of what he is really looking for and be gone when the bill comes. The very rich are so savagely efficient with their time.

“Do you have an acquisition budget?”

“We do. You can help to steer it.”

“Do you have targets in Washington?”

“Somewhat. We need your guidance there, too.”

“Would you consider paying me in stock?”

For this question he sat back, took a long sip, and returned to his pose.  
“Perhaps.”

We went on like this for a few more questions until the food arrived. The penne was over-sauced; his club sandwich looked better. We ate and made brittle small talk, knowing the real conversation would resume when the plates were cleared. Colin had stopped with the ball. The girl had moved into the shade, out of sight. I lay down my fork and signaled the waiter. He came and took the plates and asked us in English if we would like dessert. I ordered a coffee and Arnaud asked for a sherry. They came back with a French press and a bottle of Tio Pepe. Arnaud asked him to leave the bottle on the table and two glasses.

“It’s fine.”

“Please, join me.”

“The coffee is enough. It’s fine. You enjoy though.”

“I surely will. Only Americans are afraid to drink alone.”

“You’re funny.”

“It’s not a joke.”

“I know.”

When the food was cleared, I could sense that Arnaud was in distress over my ambivalence. He was in no mood to eat. I dug in and he had his arms folded, peppering me with questions.

“What firms you would you go after if we did this deal, Mark?” The sun shifted and he was no longer sitting in the shade, squinting at me with his sparkling cufflinks.

I was thinking about Monica’s canvases and how Carmen was planning to lay them out, whether the Jasper Johns would clash against her work or not, if it mattered, if it was more important that she was showing in this gallery in the uncharted wilds of the Barrio Gotico, and I thought about

Google Trekker and when they last combed through my neighborhood, every piece of tech we used to be elsewhere, to help us to fall out of time, those oculus glasses they gave me at the Refugees International fundraiser last month, told me to wear them and press a button on the side, look around and you are in an internment camp for Muslims in Myanmar, you try and eat a crab cake and drink your pinot noir as you swivel and see blue sky and down to a ravine with free flowing sewage and to a young crippled woman in a wheelchair wailing and wailing, her father has died, and the flies just ward over him as he bakes, you hear the melancholy music and look up and see barbed wire and then you remove those glasses and you are back in American prosperity with hors d'oeuvres, sequin cocktail dresses, and men named Grant and Philip. The question was so prosaic I could not help to flash into the world of this morning, our beginnings never know our ends, the clanging of the rental bikes as we rushed through Wien towards the October countryside, following the trails along the Danube into the ruddy hills as far as Krems until the sky was pinkened. I imagined us renting a room for a night at a Heuriger, where they served us the new wine and a generous charcuterie board. We left the windows open and we could smell the crisp leaves, all night; there is nothing as wonderful as the first-time smell of a new lover, and she would giggle and murmur in German to me something private and I was careful not to damage her hands because she had her performance of Bruckner tomorrow night.

“I don’t know,” I said, “maybe there are two or three firms, but nothing I would invest in. Better to poach people. I’d decapitate a few agencies, strip away their top people. Kyle Sheppard at Brunswick is good. So is Annie Lerner. Marcus Chappman and Jorge Delorenzo. They are all Omnicom people.”

“Great! Great! So, let’s do it!”

He was leaning across the table now, the smell of blood had stirred his atavism.

I saw Colin pick up the ball again and throw it. The girl was still in the shadows, out of sight. I heard the women in tennis attire cackling about someone’s fresh Manhattan divorce, nibbling their frittatas, sipping Evian. At some point, a caricature can surpass even itself, which is a sign of danger. I saw myself again on planes and trains, aloft in Colin’s life. I did not wish to be even more rude, so I strung Arnaud along until the check came.

We made polite goodbyes and I vowed to give it serious consideration. Very serious consideration, I said.

He watched me go down to the pool. I turned and waved.  
Then he was gone.