

THAT NIGHT ALIVE

ACCOUNT 34

## DECEMBER 24

No. Now. A moment.

Of hesitation, as expected. I should have known.

I should have known better. I should have stopped a while ago, put a stop to things. Before things got to this point. But I want to write one more piece, a piece of something, something else, greater. I would like to tell the truth. To make some corrections.

But that's not going to happen, is it. This is the last wisp then. I've known for a while that today is my end. Tonight, that is. I've been watching the numbers shift on the clock, counting down, as if to New Year's Eve. But there is still this last sliver of existence to endure. See what there is to see at the last minute, when it all becomes transparent. Or obvious. I can't remember what they call it. Before my final failure.

The worst thing about this disease, or so they say, is that it has a deadline. The doctor can determine your exact time of death. (Paperwork can be filled out in advance. Plots can be arranged.) The press keeps reporting, repeating the stories. Confusion is to be expected.

But I'm not reading any more. The necessary pages have been destroyed.

The champagne has been poured. I have poured it myself. I remember when people used to drink on certain holidays, before the celebrations were suspended. The smell of excitement on the street.

But my windows are sealed. Icicles hang down in front. I look past them, into the city. This City of Dreams. A blurred sign seems Japanese. Sirens in the distance. I wrap a blanket, maybe velvet, around my shoulders in case of shock. I imagine fireworks.

Although the doctor has told me not to think like that. It will be as if someone flips a switch and all the lights of the city go off at once. All the lights of the world, in fact. You won't feel a thing. And isn't that what I've always wanted?

ACCOUNT 33

DECEMBER 20

I've always wanted to be objective, impersonal, and great. To do a good job and get it right. To produce something monumental but not out of marble. Not that kind of artist. I wanted to clarify the confusion of things. That was my directive. But I was responsible for my own work, that's what they said. Reports were to be self-corrected.

And now, the end. Almost, that is. And what have I done?

I have done a bad job. Do they have any proof?

Either way: what have I done to prepare myself?

Because there is still time to consider suicide, as always.

Which is what I've always planned. But not like this. I thought I could pick my own death date and do it quietly, after certain things had been achieved. After something (not a novel, not any more) had been accomplished. After I had become accomplished.

I have pills and old red wine. (Enough?) And rope (which I wouldn't know what to do with). And one antique electrical device that can be dropped into a tub.

I will have to do it soon, given my condition.

In the meantime, I might do something else. There is still time. But no reprieve. Not one person, yet, has recovered from this disease.

I look out: darkness. With sparkle at the edges. Navy skyline, and I wonder: which dress? So many fabrics, some metallics.

And I am surprised by the luxury, frankly. I try to enjoy what I have before it's gone. That's what was suggested. The bathroom is spotless and cold green marble, which I would have never chosen for myself, obviously. The light fixtures are impossible to describe. The body potions in opaque brown bottles smell like orange rind.

I once knew someone who committed suicide and he was thoughtful enough to lay down a tarp first. But he had used a gun.

## ACCOUNT 32

### OCTOBER 1

He had used a gun? The doctor advises against old-fashioned weapons and suggests something else, less invasive. He tells me to go home and wait.

Outside, it is autumn, I think. The dates on which the seasons begin are always changing. No matter. Why bother. A blip in the brain even to think of it. Time is speeding up as I approach the end, as I had been told it would. Stop looking around the bend.

I have a friend (call him Jake) who, I thought, would save me. He seemed to have access to a stockpile of medicine rumored to do the trick. But he has not been able to do anything for me. Not yet, but maybe. There are difficulties. Obstacles, he calls them. Plus, one has obligations. There are other people. So I make a list. Things to be done. Things I should do.

In order to prepare myself. That's what I keep hearing in the waiting rooms, in the elevators. Here's my chance to do it right. But.

I always thought I'd leave something behind. A body of work. A final, finished product. Wasn't that the point of everything? Or at least an epitaph. I was going to write that, at least, long ago, at

the start, when I arrived in this city, but so far, I haven't. My plans have not worked out.

Tonight I will destroy my notes, my sources. Also, I don't want to cause any more trouble. That's what they told me.

I have instructions for how to get rid of everything. I will mangle or disintegrate, depending. They forced me to read the manual about how to proceed, and I fingerprinted each page to prove that I understood. I saw there was no mention of my personal work, my micro memoirs. What to do with them. A loophole, perhaps. I didn't ask.

Maybe they think I destroyed the nonfiction long ago, when I was supposed to.

The micro memoirs are useless to them, in any case. Not even an official genre. Scattered paragraphs, sometimes less. They look like just another romance or a mystery. To the interrogators and random readers. (It is the work for hire they are worried about.) The memoirs are just what I've always had, nothing to get excited about. Notebooks made out of paper, even, and falling apart. They won't last. Overfilled, over the years, with flashes of feeling, phrases to remember, playbills, ticket stubs, signs that life has been lived and one is so well-traveled. Paint chips of colors I have loved. Such stuff, too much. To burn, that is.

ACCOUNT 31

JUNE 20

To burn, that is, the skin, just a pinch. This is how the doctor explains it, the technique to diagnose my disease.

And then: wait a minute.

And then: I am given my expiration date. The doctor says I can put the rings back on my fingers. Although sapphires and black jade won't save me now. (Some people think they ward off evil spirits.)

He says that given my history, plus the time spent in Thailand and Fez, my disease should end on December 25. That's the date. Just a coincidence. It has nothing to do with Christmas, which might be on a different day this year.

I point out that I have been living most recently in Paris. I was there for some time. I have just returned home, here.

The doctor says, in that case, I can look back and figure out when everything began, when this disease was transmitted to me, even which evening. But now that it has started, it would proceed, regardless. So why bother with history and literature? But if I wanted, he could give me something to read.

Then he asks if I'd been targeted. Could someone have in-

jected me? Maybe. I took subways and flew on commercial airplanes and did my own shopping, sometimes, rarely. If that's what he was asking, but it wasn't. What he meant was: did I have any enemies? I suppose. Perhaps they were smart enough not to reveal themselves to me. And the doctor admits that, yes, this is a good possibility. Given my line of work and so forth.

Although I have kept my work a secret from him.

He does not know about my reports. That I write reports to fill up the press, to fill up the cracks. I write reports so tiny that they are inescapable. They flicker into any, every attention span. My work is like perfume, slowly suffocating everyone in the room.

The doctor says he is sorry that he doesn't have any answers. But I haven't asked him any questions.

He reassures me that the species is not in trouble. Only the individual. But the individual is expendable, yes?

And the doctor apologizes immediately. He says something else about my death sentence. Another mistake. Not in front of a patient. But it's fine. It gives me an idea. Death sentence: time to write my last lines. Like an epitaph but not quite. Time to make an effort and do it right.

The Japanese have a tradition of writing a death poem before they leave this world. An ancient tradition, not something invented to deal with the current crisis. Really, the doctor says, how

do you know that, although he is looking at one of his screens now and not at me. I spent some time in Tokyo. But the attendant has already opened the door to pull me out. So the doctor doesn't ask me when or why. Or why not, even.

He says he will see me again in the fall.

I think ahead to autumn. I try to remember. Windy streets, leaves blowing. The cold ocean.

## PAINT CHIP

### WISTERIA

The cold ocean—so baby blue, so true!—surrounds me on this island. No, the water is more like a river, two rivers, that is, and I breathe it in, all the salt and sting. I have just arrived, finally, after waiting for so long, and so I take a moment to feel the wind off the water. Red leaves blow past shop windows filled with golden bowls. Autumn, my favorite season, and a fresh start. There was a writer I loved who kept a journal and in it he wrote that autumn “is indeed a spring. All the year is a spring.” But he is not my role model, not really, not at all, but I have some of his books, along with others, among my clothes not meant for winter. I am carrying everything with me. But that’s all right, and I feel sure that I can manage, because this is it, my new beginning, my real life, finally.

My first apartment is just a room with bars on the windows, and although I can’t see the water any more, not right now, I am happy to be here, home. I am down near the ground, which is not the most desirable level, I know. Because things can slip in through the bars, through the cracks. There is always the chance of an attack.

I imagine another apartment, a better place, something beautiful that will appear later. It will be part of an overall artful life, full of things like metallic wallpaper and old red wine and a white lacquered desk scattered with good work. There will be huge windows with views of the skyline and the river. That's what I imagine, things like that, success.

I write it all down, what I can, when I can, because it's nice to have a record.

I have nothing from my childhood, for example. Which was landlocked and seems like a story remembered by someone else, although I remember it, of course, sporadically, sometimes. I remember the waiting, waiting all the time, inside, with the air conditioning on, in my bedroom with the beige carpet and my plastic tea set while my father cut the grass on Saturday mornings. I remember waiting for something (beautiful) to happen, to begin. But it never did.

Someone gave me a puzzle so that I could entertain myself, but I wasn't interested in figuring out things like that if there was no prize. I wanted adventure and treasure. I longed for activities that required long black dresses and crystal earrings.

And now here I am, finally. Although I don't have any long dresses, not yet. I don't even have any closets. But that's all right, and at least I am here, existing in this city, the city of New York, where things can happen, the center of the world.

That's what I've read, that's what I said.

I am breathless, having just arrived.

The heat hisses, but I don't understand the system. I struggle to open the window, just a sliver. I run my hand along the walls, which are bumpy with things buried under the old paint.

I take out my stack of paint chips and wonder which color. Although no alterations are allowed within the apartment. Changes will cost you. But I've always taken as many paint chips as possible, as many as I could carry, because they are free, at least for now, and you never know what might happen, when you might need them.

Paint chips are one of my mnemonic devices, for remembering what living here is like.

I shuffle the colors, as if they were the cards of a fortune-teller. Maybe they will reveal my future and foretell my story. Although maybe not.

I look outside and see a woman in front of a newsstand. She takes off her gloves, just for a moment, to fondle the numbers on a lottery ticket, admiring the combinations. And she smiles, in love, good luck.

This autumn is colder than ever before.

The frozen sidewalk turns into a mirror, and a dog walks by in a mink coat.

I struggle to close the window, but it's too hard. Somehow, I will have to fill the gap.