



# INFESTATION

It ended. A renewed military campaign, enacted in swift concert with the most powerful industrial nations, served to do away with the goats entirely in most parts. Some towns saw inclement weather or lack of local resources do the job. Others introduced predators into the streets, like lions and wolves. In any event, the goats receded. The epidemic was over. Parks, hospitals, bakeries, and barbed wire fencing—everywhere, suddenly goat-free. And the country gave out a sigh that said, “Now what?” All felt it. Whether or not someone started a new life or tried to salvage an old one, everyone was forced to live in an entirely new world without goats overrunning everything everywhere. It was overwhelming. Before the goats, people had lived in a world where not having goats everywhere wasn’t worth bringing up at all—inasmuch as people don’t mention not having cabanas everywhere or stopwatches or park benches—but now not having goats around defined just about everything. You

could drive to work, yes, just like before the goats, though not because you always could, but because now there were no goats in the street. You could shop at the supermarket, thank god, exactly as before, though not just because farms had grown the produce and shipped it to town, but because now goats hadn't eaten it all ahead of time.

4      Something not being there at all is much different from something first being there and then not being there, Mr. Hunter felt, and it having been there once would always set it apart from all the other things that never were at all. His wife, Jenna, had disappeared just before the goats were vanquished. She stepped outside during a party celebrating the imminent end of the epidemic, and just like that she was gone. Or, rather, it wasn't at that exact moment that she was gone: it is always much after the last time you see someone that it truly becomes the last time you saw them. For example, at that moment, she had simply left and Mr. Hunter would definitely see her again soon—mingling at the party, getting their coats, walking in the parking lot, at the house. It was only later, after having not seen her in any of those moments, that he in fact would not see her again.

Not that Mr. Hunter didn't try to see her, he just didn't know where to look. At first he looked around the party and then in the car and then at the house and in the yard. Later, he looked behind cupboards, under carpets, around corners, through shutters, beside toolsheds, beneath floorboards, in chimneys, and everywhere he could think of over the months, yelling *Jenna, Jenna*, but Mr. Hunter was never very good

at solving puzzles or being loud. He imagined her in all the same nonexistent places that the goats must have gone off to because, just like them, Jenna was also not in all the places they weren't. The goats were not everywhere. You could fill an ocean with where they weren't, and more. They were not in the suburbs, not in the country, and not in the soil, not in the sewers, not in the attics, not in the basements, the closets, the ducts, the highways, the stairs, and not in delivery trucks or mailboxes. Just about anywhere, they were not. And neither was Jenna. So wherever they weren't not, Mr. Hunter thought, maybe Jenna wasn't not there as well.

Half accepting that Jenna wouldn't be found, Mr. Hunter, still desperate, tried replacing her instead with a long queue of women who were also waiting to replace something of their own. When he went to Laura's apartment after a few dates, he'd hoped that they could be like two streams or strands pouring together from nothing (but they weren't) and that it would make him happy (but it didn't). They were more like two empty photo albums trying to steal pictures from each other. It was awful and, by the end of the night, even a bit angry and violent. They scratched and hammered at each other like they were doors they could break through, though obviously they weren't, and by morning they hadn't reached the other side of anything but the night, and that only barely, so Mr. Hunter had brunch alone at an outside cafe and, hungover, watched the helicopters not hover at all anywhere and not slaughter goats anymore with the same

enthusiasm he didn't feel not peppering his eggs. Later that day at the copy shop, Mr. Hunter said he was ready to settle down and then threw a stapler across the room. Maybe Jenna wouldn't be replaced with a long list of women, he considered.

The Coalition, though, had begun work on replacing things all over town, signs and streets and storefronts, previously destroyed by the goats. The Coalition, an interim council during the crisis, remained in power even after the goats had been removed and, when not sleeping with each other, worked diligently on renovations and town restoration. Albert, president of the Coalition, declared, "These plans are not only for mere regular human living, but also for our new human/not-goat living," and with that began unveiling new finished projects weekly. "The structure of these gates and roads and sidewalks, originally built with paths and mechanisms to accommodate both people and goats, will remind us that the goats once were here, and these little doors next to our own doors will tell us everyday that they once may have shared the world with us if not taken it over completely. By building for them in their absence, we remind ourselves what to be thankful for," and, just like that, what had only been a constant sensation became a physical reality. People lived not just in a town, but in a fully rendered town-without-goats.

Inspired, Mr. Hunter tried the same approach with Jenna. Wherever she would have been in his life, he tried to put something there that physically made it clear. He didn't want to replace Jenna with new Jennas anymore. And he