

**I
HAVE
LOST
MY WAY**

**GAYLE
FORMAN**

SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in the United States of America by Viking,
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2018
First published in Great Britain in 2018 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
A CBS COMPANY

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1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

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A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library.

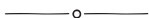
PB ISBN 978-1-4711-7372-1
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-7373-8

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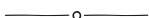
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY



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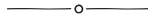


For Ken Wright, Anna Jarzab, and Michael Bourret



*Come, come, whoever you are. Wanderer, worshiper,
lover of leaving. It doesn't matter. Ours is not a caravan
of despair. Come, even if you have broken your vows a
thousand times. Come, yet again, come, come.*

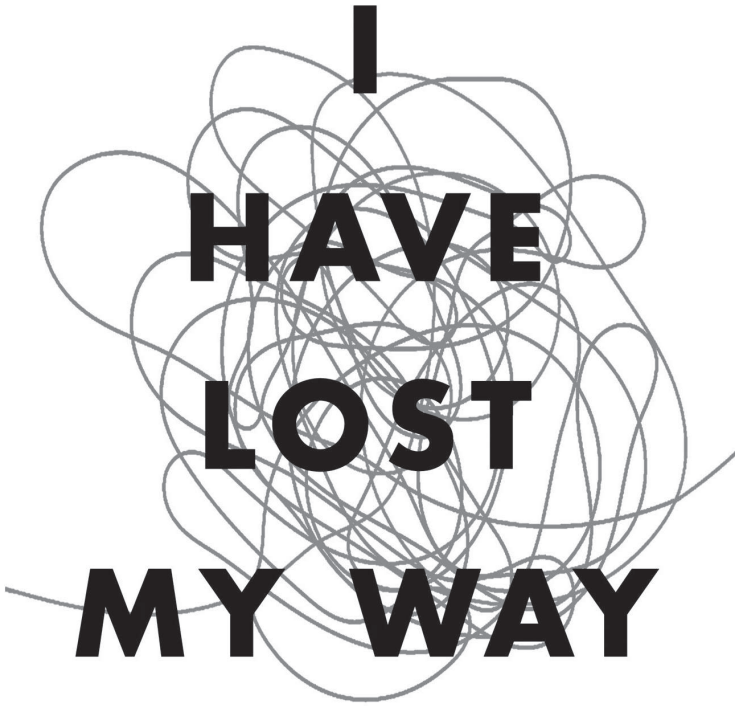
—Jalaluddin Rumi



Not all those who wander are lost.

—J. R. R. Tolkien

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1



I HAVE LOST MY WAY

I have lost my way.

Freya stares at the words she just typed into her phone.

I have lost my way. Where did *that* come from?

“Excuse me, miss,” the car service driver repeats. “I think I have lost my way.” And Freya startles back to reality. She’s in the backseat of a town car on her way to her seventh—or is it eighth?—doctor’s appointment in the past two weeks, and the driver has gotten turned around outside the tunnel.

She toggles over to her calendar. “Park and Seventieth,” she tells the driver. “Turn right on Third, then left on Seventy-First.”

She returns her attention to the screen. *I have lost my way.* Eighteen characters. But the words have the undeniable ring of truth to them, the way middle C does. The way few of her posts these days do. Earlier this morning, someone from Hayden’s office put up a photo of her gripping a microphone, grinning. *#BornToSing*, the caption read. *#ThankfulThursday*.

Really it should read #TBT, because the image is not only weeks old, it's of a person who no longer exists.

I have lost my way.

What would happen if she posted that? What would they say if they knew?

It's only when her phone makes the whooshing noise that Freya realizes she did post it. The responses start to flow in, but before she has a chance to read them, there's a text from her mother: 720 Park Ave, and a dropped pin. Because of course her mother is monitoring the feed as vigilantly as Freya. And of course her mother has misunderstood. Anyway, Freya hasn't lost her way. She's lost her voice.

She deletes the post, hoping it was fast enough that no one screenshot it or shared it, but she knows nothing on the internet ever goes away. Unlike in real life.

Her mother is waiting for her when the car arrives, pacing, holding the test results from the last doctor, which she had to hightail it into the city to collect. "Good, good, you're here," she says, opening the door before the driver has pulled to a complete stop and yanking Freya to the sidewalk before she has a chance to give him the ten-dollar tip she's holding. "I already filled out the paperwork." She says this like she did it to save time, but she fills out the paperwork at all of Freya's doctor's appointments.

They're ushered straight past reception into the examination room. It's the kind of service a \$1,500 consult, no insurance taken (thanks, Hayden) buys you.

“What seems to be the problem?” the doctor asks as he washes his hands. He does not look at Freya. He probably has no idea who she is. He looks old, like a grandfather, though reportedly he has treated the sort of one-named wonder that as of a few weeks ago everyone thought Freya was on her way to becoming.

She wishes she’d read some of the responses before deleting that tweet. Maybe someone would’ve told her what to do. Maybe someone would’ve told her it didn’t matter if she could sing. They’d still love her.

But she knows that’s bullshit. Love is conditional. Everything is.

“She’s lost her voice,” her mother says. “Temporarily.” She goes through the tediously familiar chronology—“third week in the studio” and “all going flawlessly” and *blah blah blah blah*—and all the while the phrase *I have lost my way* goes through Freya’s head, like a song on repeat, the way she and Sabrina used to loop the same track over and over again until they’d dissected it, uncovered all its secrets, and made them their own. It drove their mother crazy, until she discovered the utility of it.

The doctor palpates her neck, peers into her throat, scopes her sinuses. Freya wonders how he would respond if she hocked a loogie. If he would actually look at her like a person instead of a piece of machinery that has malfunctioned. If he would *hear* her, singing voice or not.

“Can you sing a high C for me?” the doctor asks.

Freya sings a high C.

“She can hit the individual notes,” her mother explains. “And her pitch is perfect. Hayden says he’s never heard pitch like that before.”

“Is that a fact?” the doctor says, feeling the cords in her neck. “Let’s hear a song. Something simple for me, like ‘Happy Birthday.’”

“Happy Birthday.” Who can’t sing “Happy Birthday”? A child can sing “Happy Birthday.” A person who can’t sing at all can sing “Happy Birthday.” To show her opinion of such a request, she starts to sing, but in a heavy French accent.

“*Apee birsday to you . . .*” she trills. Her mother frowns, and Freya doubles down on the accent. “*Apee birsday to vous . . .*”

But her voice is smarter than she thinks. It will not be outsmarted by antics or a bad fake accent. And as soon as the song makes the baby leap in octave, from G4 to G5, she gets tripped up in it. The panic takes over. The breath turns to lead.

“*Appee birsday, dear . . .*” And on the *dear* it happens. The air shuts off. The song is strangled mid-breath. A stillborn melody.

“Happy birthday to me,” she finishes in sarcastically atonally American deadpan, making a slicing gesture across her throat in case the message wasn’t clear enough.

“Is it paralysis? We heard something like that happened with”—her mother’s voice drops—“*Adele.*”

Freya can hear the hope in her mother’s voice. Not because she wants vocal paralysis but because she wants to

link Freya to Adele. A few years back, she read that book *The Path*, and she bought into it 200 percent. *Dream it, be it* is her motto.

“I’m going to send you for some tests,” the doctor says, retreating into the already-familiar jargon. “A CAT scan, a biopsy, an LEMG, maybe an X-ray.” He pulls out a card, slides it over, and gives Freya a look that does not seem all that Hippocratic. “And you might consider talking to someone.”

“We did, but the lobotomy didn’t take.”

“Freya!” her mother scolds. To the doctor, “We’re already seeing a therapist.”

We. Like they’re seeing him together. Like they’re both taking the little pills that are supposed to quell the anxiety that is supposedly stifling Freya’s voice.

“This *just* happened. Literally overnight. If this were”—and here her mother’s voice drops to a whisper—“*psychological*, it wouldn’t happen in the blink of an eye like that, would it?”

The doctor makes noncommittal noises. “Let’s schedule a follow-up in two weeks.”

Two weeks is too late. Hayden has made that clear. He called in favors to arrange a visit to the famous doctor, treater of one-named wonders like Adele and Lorde and Beyoncé. He paid the \$1,500 consultation fee because this guy, Hayden swore, is a miracle worker—implying that what Freya needs is not overpriced medical care but an actual miracle.

Outside, Hayden’s car and driver are waiting, even though he didn’t send the driver to take Freya here. The driver opens the door and bows slightly. “Mr. Booth has requested I bring

you to the offices.”

Freya has spent much of the past two years in Hayden’s offices, but the request makes her feel queasy. Her mother, who still, after all this time, acts like Hayden is the emperor and she the peasant, looks freaked out. She frantically scrolls through her texts. “He probably just wants to know how it went.”

Hayden Booth doesn’t summon without reason, and the reason would not be to gather information. Freya’s sure he received a call from the doctor the minute the door shut behind them. Or, who knows, maybe he had a secret camera filming the entire exam.

If a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it, does it make a sound? If she doesn’t go to Hayden’s office, he can’t fire her. And if he can’t fire her, her career isn’t over. And if her career isn’t over, people will still love her.

Right?

“I’m tired,” she tells her mother, with a weary wave. “You go.”

“He asked for us both.” She looks to the driver. “Did he ask for us both?”

The driver has no clue. Why would he?

“I’m exhausted from all the stupid doctors’ appointments,” Freya says, going into what her mother calls diva mode. Diva mode befuddles her mother because on the one hand, *dream it, be it*, but on the other hand, it’s fucking annoying.

When her mother gets upset, she purses her lips in a way that makes her look exactly like Sabrina, or Sabrina exactly

like her. “It’s like the genes chose sides,” their old babysitter used to joke. Meaning Freya took after their father—the reddish skin, the high forehead, the telltale Ethiopian eyes—whereas Sabrina looked more like their mother, the hair curly, not kinky, the skin light enough to pass, if not for white, then Puerto Rican.

But then her mother reconsiders, and the prune mouth is gone. “You know what? Maybe that’s smarter. I’ll talk to him. Remind him that you’re only nineteen. That you’ve come so far. That we have so much momentum. Making them wait will only make them hungrier. We just need a bit more time.” She’s back on her phone. “I’m ordering you an Uber.”

“Mom. I’m quite capable of getting myself back home.”

Her mother continues tapping on the phone. Freya’s not meant to take the subway alone anymore. Her mother has a tracker installed on Freya’s phone. She exercises caution even though, like Freya’s diva attitude, this too is premature. Freya is not famous. She is somewhere between buzz and celebrity on Hayden’s scale. If she goes dancing at clubs, or hits the kind of bar or café frequented by up-and-coming Actor/Model/Singers, she’s recognized; if she does an event at a shopping mall (which she no longer does; not on brand, the publicists say), she’s mobbed. But on the subway, amid regular people, she is exactly nobody. But for her mother, every one of her actions is aspirational.

“I’m just gonna walk a bit,” Freya tells her mother. “Maybe go through the park, clear my head, see what’s on sale at Barneys.”

She knows her mother will not refuse the healing power of Barney's. Though Freya still feels mildly uncomfortable in places like that. She's often followed, and she is never sure if it's because she's half-famous or half-black.

"Go find something pretty," her mother says. "Take your mind off things."

"What else is on the schedule?" Freya asks, out of habit, because there's always something and her mother has it memorized. Her mother's awkward pause is painful. Because the answer is *nothing*. Nothing is scheduled because this time was allotted to being in the studio. Right now, she's meant to be finishing up recording. Next week, Hayden is going to some private island for a week, and then he's back in the studio with Lulia, the gap-toothed singer he discovered busking in the Berlin metro whom Hayden made so famous that her visage smirks from a billboard in Times Square.

"That could be you," Hayden once told her.

Not anymore.

"Nothing," her mother says.

"So I'll see you back at the apartment."

"Well, it's Thursday."

Thursday nights her mother and Sabrina have a standing dinner date. It usually goes unmentioned. Freya is never invited.

Obviously.

"I can put it off if you need me," her mother says.

The bitterness is awful. She can taste it. She wonders if

it'll melt the enamel off her (recently whitened) teeth.

It's also embarrassing. What should she have to be bitter about where her sister is concerned? Sabrina, who, as her mother says, has *sacrificed so much*. She whispers the last part the same way she whispers *breather* when discussing what's going on with Freya. "You're just taking a *breather*."

(*Breather* is code for *self-immolation*.)

"You'd better go," Freya tells her mother before the bitterness melts away her insides, leaving only a bag of empty skin. "Hayden's waiting."

Her mother glances at the SUV, the driver. "I'll call you as soon as I get news." She climbs into the car. "Clear your head. Take a day for yourself. Don't think about any of this. You never know—it might be just what the doctor ordered. I bet if you can go the rest of the day without thinking about this, you'll feel better. Go shopping. Go home and binge *Scandal*."

Yes, that's exactly what Freya needs. And perhaps a glass of warm milk. And a second lobotomy.

She waits for her mother to drive off before she starts walking, not south toward Barneys but west toward the park. She pulls out her phone and looks at her Instagram feed. There's another shot of her, standing outside the studio on Second Ave., under a just-blooming cherry tree. The caption reads, *#Music #Flowers #Life #BeautifulThings*, and the comments are full of nice things that should make her feel better. *Nothing more Btiful than U*. And *NEED NEW VID!* And *Follow-backPLZ!!!!*

A car honks, and someone yanks her back onto the curb, sneering, “Pay attention.” Freya doesn’t say thank you, instead walks into the park, where there’s no traffic and she can read the comments in peace.

She toggles over to her YouTube channel. Per Hayden’s instructions, she has not posted anything in months. He wanted the fans to be “famished” for new material so that when the album dropped, and new videos, they’d be devoured. Freya was worried they’d forget her, but Hayden said there were other ways to stay in the public eye and employed a publicist whose job it was to place a series of anonymous scoops about her.

Freya climbs up a hill, onto a small bridge. A group of cyclists whizzes past her, blasting through the air with their shrill whistles, as if they own the park. She opens Facebook. She types *Sabrina Kebede*. Though she only allows herself this indulgence once a month, Freya knows there won’t be anything there. Her sister’s Facebook page has been all but dormant for the past two years, maybe two or three posts, almost always tags.

And yet, there it is, a fresh post, a few weeks old. A picture posted by someone named Alex Takashida of a man, presumably Alex Takashida, holding up a delicate hand with a small sapphire ring. The caption underneath reads: *She said yes!*

Even with the face cut off, Freya recognizes that hand.

She said yes! It takes Freya a minute to understand what this means. Her sister is engaged. To Alex Takashida. Some-

one Freya has never heard of, much less met.

Freya clicks on Alex's timeline and discovers that Alex Takashida makes his posts public, and Sabrina, though not tagged, is in nearly all of them. There's Sabrina clinking glasses with Alex at a restaurant. There's Sabrina and Alex on a beach. There's Sabrina beaming between Alex and their mother. There's Sabrina looking not like someone who *sacrificed so much* but like someone happy.

It makes Freya want to puke. To console herself, she opens the app that tracks what her mother now calls her engagements. She doesn't even need to see the comments anymore to feel better. She just needs to know that they're there. That the likes and follows are growing. The uptick of numbers is reassuring. The occasional downtick makes her feel like her stomach's falling out.

Today, the numbers are going up. Those posts of her in the studio always do well. People are excited about her album. She wonders what will happen when the months go by and there is no album.

Only she knows. At the first meeting with Hayden, he'd told her exactly what would happen.

She opens the comments from this morning's ersatz post. *Love the flowers. Can't wait 4 the album.* ❤️❤️🌟🎸🎵🎧 She refreshes the page to see if anything else has come in but nothing has, and though she knows it'll only make her feel worse, she toggles back to the picture of Sabrina's hand. The cyclists whip by, blowing their awful whistles at her, shouting at her

to watch out, but Freya can't take her eyes off her sister and all that happiness. Can't escape the sickening sensation that she's done it all wrong.

I have lost my way, she thinks once more, and understands how true this is. Another cyclist whistles by, and Freya, still staring at the image of her sister's sapphire ring, jumps back and stumbles, and suddenly she is not just lost but falling, falling off the bridge onto some poor soul below.

— — —

Around the time Freya is speaking to yet another doctor who cannot help her, Harun is trying to pray.

As the men stream into the mosque, taking their places, on the rugs around Harun and his father, he tries to make his intention known to God. But for the life of him, he can't. He doesn't know what his intentions are anymore.

He will make for him a way out, his cousin had texted. But what is Harun's way out?

I have lost my way, Harun thinks as the prayer begins.

"*Allahu Akbar*," he hears his father chant beside him.

And again, the thought: *I have lost my way*. Harun tries to focus. But he can't. He can think of nothing but James.

Forgive me, Harun had texted this morning.

No response.

Not even a *Get the fuck out my life*, which was the last thing James had said to him.

There wouldn't be a response. James never said things he didn't mean.

Unlike Harun.

When the *zuhr* concludes, Harun and his father go outside to collect their shoes and exchange pleasantries with the other men. All around, there is talk of Hassan Bahara, who died last week while fueling his car at the gas station.

“It was his heart,” Nasir Janjua tells Abu.

Clucking of tongues ensues. Confessions of high cholesterol levels. Wifely naggings to get more exercise.

“No, no,” Nasir Janjua says. “It was a heart defect, silent until now.”

A defect of the heart. Harun knows a thing or two about those. But unlike Hassan Bahara, his defect isn’t silent. He’s known about it for years.

Abu clasps an arm on Harun’s shoulder. “Everything okay?”
I have lost my way. He imagines telling Abu this.

But that would only break his father’s heart. It was always a choice of whose to break. As for his own, a foregone conclusion. Broken either way. It’s what happens with defective hearts.

“Yeah, Abu, I’m fine,” he says.

“You sure?” he asks. “You don’t often come to mosque.” There’s no reproach in his voice. His older brother Saif started middle school on the day 9/11 happened, and after that he began calling himself Steve and refusing to attend mosque. By the time Harun stopped going, the battle had already been lost. Or won. Depending on how you looked at it.

“I figured since I’m going . . .” he trails off. “Amir goes every day.”

“Yes, your cousin is very devout.” Abu ruffles his hair.
“You are a good boy. You have made Ammi very happy.”

“And you?”

“Always.”

It is for the *always* he’s doing this. To continue the always.
To never lose the always.

They reach the intersection of Sip and Westside. Harun turns left, in the opposite direction from his house and Abu’s store.

“I thought no school today,” Abu says, assuming that is where Harun is going.

There’s never school on Thursdays. Thursdays are the invisible day added to the weekly schedule last year. Thursdays are their day to be together in Manhattan, where they can slip through the streets like ghosts.

In winter, they meet at Chelsea Market, waltzing through the restaurants they can’t afford to eat at while James, who wants to be a chef one day, ogles the fresh pasta, the buttery croissants, the sausages drying from the rafters, and describes all the meals he will cook for them one day. When the weather is warm, they meet under a little arched bridge in Central Park.

They have not missed a single Thursday. Not when a blizzard shut down the aboveground trains, not when James was sick with bronchitis and all Harun wanted to do was get him somewhere warm and dry but for the life of him could not imagine where such a place might be. They’d wound up in a Panera, drinking tea, watching YouTube videos, pretending it

was their apartment.

“I’m just going to tie up some loose ends,” he tells Abu.

“Don’t be late for dinner,” Abu says. “Your mother has taken the last two days off work to cook. Your brother is coming. With his wife.” His father tries not to frown at the mention of Saif’s wife but is not entirely successful.

“I won’t be late,” Harun says, even though before he left the house, he took his passport and the five hundred dollars cash meant for tomorrow’s trip and tucked them into his pocket. It was a rash, last-minute thing to do, but it opened up the possibility of not getting on that plane, of running away for good, in which case he would be very late for dinner.

Coward.

I have lost my way.

He hugs his father goodbye, which isn’t something he often does, and he worries that it’ll arouse suspicion, but it doesn’t, because Abu says only: “Be home in time. You know how your mother gets.”

As soon as Abu is safely out of sight, he texts: **Going to our place @ park. Meet me there.**

At Journal Square, he enters the PATH station. The smell of the tunnels—musty, moldy, redolent of old garages—makes him ache for James.

Everything does.

He takes the train to the terminus at Thirty-Third Street and walks out past the neon signs of the chain clothing stores. In the early days, before they’d learned the secret public spaces in the city, they’d sometimes stopped in one of

these shops, trying on all manner of sweaters and trousers neither had any intention of buying, because they could sneak into the same dressing room and, behind those slatted doors, the discarded sweaters at their feet like a camouflage, steal a kiss. Every so often they'd buy something, like the socks Harun is wearing today. They called it rent.

The phone rings in his hand and Harun jumps, hope rushing in like a rising tide, but it's not James.

"I was thinking it might be nice to buy some of that hand cream for Khala," Ammi says, even though there's already a suitcase of gifts for Khala and Khalu, for the cousins, and of course for the prospective families he'd be meeting. "Are you passing by the Hudson?"

Hudson is a mall not far from their house. "Sure," he tells her, because what is one more lie on the steaming pile of them?

"And some ginger. I want to make you some tea for the plane."

"They won't let me bring liquids through security."

"Well, until security," Ammi says. "To keep you in good health."

His throat closes. He is a coward and a liar and a bad son. He hangs up, and a minute later his phone buzzes with a text and he pulls it out, once again full of hope, but it is Amir.

I will see you soon, Inshallah.

Inshallah, he texts back.

He walks into the park, guided by autopilot and hope, to their spot at the bridge. When he sees someone waiting on

top, under the cherry tree that, on that last day, they kissed under, his hope surges again. It could be him, he tells himself, even though the skin is too light and the frame is too small and also it is a woman. If only James were a woman. Ha.

I'm here, he texts.

There is no answer, but that doesn't stop him from seeing James everywhere. There he is, riding a bike in spandex, though James would be horrified by anyone even picturing him in such a ridiculous getup. There he is pushing a baby in a jogging stroller, though James hates exercise. There he is coming toward him, through the tunnel under the bridge.

None of these people are James, and for that, Harun hates them. He hates everything and everyone in this world. If Allah made the world, why did he make Harun wrong? If Allah is love, then why isn't James the one walking through the tunnel instead of some white boy?

This is what he's thinking at the exact moment the girl who is not James falls off the side of the bridge, landing with a loud thud on the boy who is also not James.

— — —

Around the time Freya is speaking to yet another doctor who cannot help her, and Harun is trying to pray, Nathaniel is emerging onto a crowded Manhattan street with no idea of where he is.

"I have lost my way," he says as people stream by him. When no one responds, he isn't that surprised. He's been invisible for a while.

He's followed the directions exactly as the sign at the airport told him to. Walked to the edge of the terminal, climbed on the bus bound for Manhattan. But he must've fallen asleep, because he awoke to the hiss of the bus's pneumatic door and everyone else had filed out.

He tries to focus, but he's disoriented and bleary. The name of the flight he was on, a red-eye, turned out to be literal.

The night before, as the plane sped past the quilt of a country Nathaniel never got to know, around him people snored away wearing sleep masks and neck pillows, taking pills to trick themselves into thinking they were home in bed. But he hadn't slept in the past two weeks, so there seemed little chance he was going to sleep on the plane. After take-off, the passenger in front of him tilted his seat back, sending Nathaniel's knees to his chest. He'd stayed up half the night reading his father's copy of *The Lord of the Rings*, and when he could stand that no more, the guidebook he'd stolen from the library. In the dim cabin light, he learned about sights he would not see. The Empire State Building. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Central Park. The Botanical Gardens. He flipped through the index, looking at the piece of paper he'd taken from his father. Their meeting point.

Out in the daylight, Nathaniel blinks and tries to orient himself. Everything is so new and so different. The buildings taller than the tallest trees. The light unrestrained by clouds, the sound so loud he has to close his eyes to be able to process it (there, the thumping bass of reggae music; there, the

distant sound of jackhammers; there, voices arguing; there, a baby crying). After so much silence, he has auditory culture shock, if such a thing exists.

He's jolted back to the moment when someone pushes past him. It's a rude gesture, a New York gesture, even, but he relishes the human touch. He's been alone for two weeks, but it might as well be an eternity, and he'll take what he can get.

Still, when another passerby hisses at him to move it, he does. He retreats out of the flow of traffic, under an awning. From here, he can watch. There are people, more people that he's ever seen in one place, doing everything fast, from smoking cigarettes to having animated conversations on their cell phones. No one looks at him.

He didn't really consider this. The people. The city. A rush of regret because he won't have time to experience it. Now, where is he meant to be going again? The subway, an alphabet soup of letters and numbers. His was easy. The A train. According to the map at the airport, the bus should've dropped him off right on the corner where the subway was supposed to be. But he's not on the corner, but in the middle of a long block. He walks to the nearest corner. The street sign reads: *Forty-Second Street*. Across the street is a park, a patch of green amid the skyscrapers. Which is nice, unexpected—even the park seems surprised to find itself here—but that doesn't help him figure out where he is and where he's supposed to be.

"I have lost my way," he says to the stream of pedestrians.

“Can anyone tell me where the A train is?”

But they keep moving, a million-limbed organism rather than individual people, and then there’s Nathaniel, the amputee.

On the plane, in the guidebook, he’d read that Manhattan was a grid, avenues running north-south, streets east-west, street numbers going higher as you go north, the avenues dividing into east and west with Fifth Avenue running down the middle like a spine. If you were lost, the book said, the landmarks could help you get your bearings: the Twin Towers to the south, the Empire State Building to the north.

The Twin Towers, he knows, are gone. It’s a sort of hubris to put something like that in a book as a landmark, a guidepost, to assume it will always be there.

“One day we’ll go to New York City,” his father had promised him, scratching it onto the list on the inside wall of his closet. “One day we’ll go to Mount Denali,” his father had promised him.

“What about the Shire?” Nathaniel had asked when he was too little to know the difference between places real and imagined.

“Sure,” his dad had promised. “We’ll go there too.”

Yellow taxis pass by, looking like they did in the TV shows he and his father used to occasionally watch in between the documentaries. He could just take a taxi to his final destination. He pulls out his wallet, furtively counting the rest of his cash (the guidebook warned: “Be wary of pickpockets and

scam artists”). After emptying out the bank account, there had been enough money for the plane ticket, the bus fare to and from the airport, and about a hundred and twenty bucks left over. Part of him had known that going anywhere, let alone New York City, with so small a cushion was folly. But that was just the point. Remove the net. Eliminate the possibility of backtracking.

Still, after so long being prudent and frugal, he can't completely shed his old ways. He decides against getting a taxi. He has no idea how much the trip will cost. He smells like country, like a rube, and maybe the driver will rip him off. (“Be wary of pickpockets and scam artists.”) And besides, he doesn't know how to make a taxi stop. He sees how other people do it, stepping into the street, sticking out a hand, but suspects if he did that, the cars would pass right by.

He pulls out his phone, missing his father so much it aches. He dials the number. Three rings before the call goes to voicemail. “Tell me something good,” his father's recording says.

“Hey, Dad,” Nathaniel says. “I made it.”

He hangs up the phone, opens the guidebook, and thumbs through for the big map in the middle. He finds Forty-Second Street and draws a line across it until he finds a square block of green, amazed, relieved, ebullient, even, that there's some representation, some proof, of where he is.

The patch of green is Bryant Park. Sixth Avenue, which runs up the west side of the park, dead-ends at Central Park.

Central Park! That was one of the places in the book. To the left of the park he sees the big blue circle for the A train. He could walk there. Why not?

He sets off, feeling the same lightness he'd experienced when he'd made the decision to come here. He passes Fiftieth Street, the signs blaring for Rockefeller Center, more people crossing at a single intersection than in his entire graduating class. He passes Fifty-Fourth Street and sees signs for the Museum of Modern Art, and though he's not visiting it, he feels like he's seen some of it. ("One day we'll see the *Mona Lisa*," his father had promised, and though Nathaniel is fairly certain the *Mona Lisa* is not here, it still feels like he has made a little good on that promise.)

He gets to Central Park faster than he thought. Too fast. He can see that the western edge reaches the big circle where the A train is, but he opens up the map in his book again. The park itself runs to 110th Street. He can walk there. Or all the way up. On the bus before he'd fallen asleep, he'd caught a glimpse of the looming Manhattan skyline from across the river just before they'd entered the tunnel. It seemed inconceivable that he could breach such a fortress, but here he is. He can afford to take his time. His father will understand.

Entering the park, he's surprised by how familiar it seems. It's an entirely different kind of nature from what he grew up in, but it turns out that trees are trees, flowers are flowers, birds are birds, wind is wind.

Overhead, the sun is a little west of high noon. He knows

where he is. He knows which way is north. He abandons the main roadway for one of the smaller paths. He might get a little lost, but the sleep has shaken away from him. He feels more awake and alive than he has in days. He knows where he's going.

The path winds under a small arched bridge, a tunneled portal into the park. He examines the bricks. They're so old, the keystone binding the two seams is almost invisible. Under the bridge the air is dark and musty. He holds his breath, like he used to when they would drive through tunnels, his father encouraging him in the longer ones (*You're almost there, buddy*).

I'm almost there, he tells his father as he steps out of the tunnel. He feels a rush of air that turns out to be Freya falling, but he doesn't have time to see that, much less comprehend it, because she has landed on top of him and everything has gone black.