

Chapter One: A Birthday gone Viral

Marissa Chen had been born on March 13th, exactly fifty years ago. She stared out the window of her small colonial home in which she lived alone, having divorced her husband a few months earlier. Her only regret was that she waited so long. Marissa, whose short black hair sat sloppily on her thin and youthful face, worked for the firm of Jacobs and Richmond in Washington DC. She lived in Burtonsville, not too far from the Capitol which would be a short drive away were it not for endless traffic that greeted her nearly every morning. Her husband lived in an apartment in the district since he left the home; he worked at the CDC. Both did well enough in the settlement to enable them to live their lives.

Her kids called her this morning to wish her a happy fiftieth. Her genius daughter Jessica taught biochemistry at the University of Beijing, a prestigious position especially for someone so young. Jess excelled in the sciences and linguistics, winning a Fauci scholarship to study in China, and having mastered three dialects of Chinese. When she called it was very late at night over there, but she wouldn't miss the opportunity to wake her mom up and be the first to wish her a happy birthday.

They spoke for over an hour, Jess regaling her mom stories of her run-ins with Chinese authorities and the many biological breakthroughs pouring out of the University. "So, old lady, what you going to do today? Spa? Your friends? You better not tell me you're working today!"

Marissa barely spit out any emotion; her mind was elsewhere, so she let her vivacious daughter simply talk. *Did Jessica know? How could she not?*

Charlie knew. Of that Marissa was certain. Charlie lived close by and worked as a lawyer in the Justice Department. He had been very close to his dad and didn't stomach it well when Marissa had asked for a divorce after 30 years of marriage. When he called he was more subdued.

"I was planning on coming to the party tonight," he said to his mom. "But they need me at work. Sorry about that mom. It's probably best anyway you spend it with your friends. I'm not sure they like me very much anyway. I'm too much like dad!"

"They love you Chuck, you know that," a distracted Marissa said. "But I understand why you don't want to come, and I don't blame you."

Charlie didn't respond for a bit, and then wished her a happy birthday and hung up the phone.

Of course he knew. As would everyone who showed up tonight. She had thought about calling Frenchie, with whom she shared everything. Frenchie had been her best friend ever since their law school days at Georgetown. Their kids grew up together. She vacationed with Frenchie several times a year, and it was Frenchie who finally convinced her to leave her husband, something that Frenchie herself did several years earlier.

"Marriages should have an expiration date," Frenchie said to Marissa during a spa trip to Shenandoah a year ago. "They are great for having kids, but like moldy bread they get stale and old and toxic. When the bread gets moldy, you toss it out. There's a lot of fresh bread out there, crispy, succulent, and it smells so good!"

Frenchie vowed never to settle again. "I'm having too much fun with this internet dating," she extolled. "It's like a buffet of yummy!"

Frenchie did call her and told her to be ready for a great party tonight. Four of her best friends would be there, they'd have cake and a few cocktails, then go to a comedy club in Bethesda. That had been the plan. But Marissa knew that when her pals showed up later those plans could immediately change. And if they did, who could blame them?

Ears were everywhere. Marissa didn't dare discuss what happened over the phone. If she could get Frenchie alone later, and they took proper precautions, maybe she would talk about it. That's assuming Frenchie and the others even stuck around. Her friend Patsy was already past fifty and had received good news on her birthday. Same with Frenchie. They could easily end Marissa's life tonight if they wanted to. It would make everything just so simple.

Marissa again rubbed her wrist. Maybe it was a mistake? She peered at her phone and when it came near her wrist it told her the same story. The same horrific story. How could this even be?

COVID hit the world like a tsunami at the end of Marissa's second year at Georgetown, twenty-five years ago today. As the news from across the ocean, then Seattle, then New York swept across the screens of CNN, no one knew what to do. Georgetown demanded masking, no more parties, classes were cancelled, and finally the students were told to go home for the rest of the semester. On March 13th, Marissa's twenty-fifth birthday, the feckless imbecilic President Trump finally declared a state of emergency. Already he had allowed too many people to perish by pretending this plague to end all plagues was nothing more than a flu strain.

Marissa and Frenchie, who roomed together in a small Georgetown flat, celebrated Marissa's birthday in a subdued manner, mostly switching back from CNN to MSNBC, calling family and friends, and taking sips of wine all along. By night's end they downed five bottles of red wine and were more delirious than sensible.

"Fuck Donald Trump," Frenchie yelled out of the window. "And thank God for Anthony Fauci! We love you Tony! Come over here and celebrate my best friend's birthday! She's young and pretty and ready to fuck you if you want a good lay! We love you Tony!"

Marissa shut the window and stared hard at her friend before bursting into laughter. "He is a cute old guy," Marissa laughed. "If he does come, I hope you can show some discretion and give us time alone. Maybe I should clean up the bedroom just in case."

"Have you ever fucked someone with a mask on?" Frenchie asked. "It's wild. I'm telling you, with the size of my shnoz, these masks are a blessing. I'm what I call a mask babe. Much better looking with the mask than without it. I do have some pretty amazing eyes."

"You are amazing through and through, Frenchie," said Marissa. "I may even fuck you with your mask on. I mean, I can pretend you're a guy."

Tony Fauci never did show up that night, but that didn't stop the two best friends from dreaming about him. Marissa had an amazing Federal judge clerkship set up for the summer, which was cancelled. She stayed in the apartment and watched the news most days. The entire city shut down. No restaurants, bars, or any life at all. Take out became a thing, as well as grocery delivery, and Marissa made sure to spray every box that showed up with a good whiff of Lysol. The following Fall school opened, but only virtually. Of course, they still had to pay full tuition, which irked Marissa.

“We’re paying for the degree,” said Frenchie. “School is meaningless. We’re lucky to get off easy. Class is a bitch. Now I can take class in my pajamas and watch movies as these professors blab on and on.”

By the next semester some smaller classes resumed but only for those vaccinated. N-95 masks and six-foot separation were the rules, and Marissa gladly complied. She sneered at anyone not wearing a mask and threatening the lives of others. Few dared be so brazen on the streets of DC. Most even worse masks in the car. You couldn’t be too careful. She and Frenchie stood on a long line to get their vaccines. Otherwise, they rarely left the apartment. Classes remained virtual. Graduation was cancelled. Marissa had applied for a few jobs, but no one was hiring. Still, she knew this was all best. She watched CNN much like a priest would read the bible; it was gospel to her, a singular truth, filled with apocalyptic images juxtaposed against amazing heroism. She couldn’t wait for Fauci to show up and reassure the nation, give her and everyone else instructions. The line of brilliant scientists, of compliant governors, of perspicacious newscasters simply became addictive. Whatever she had lost from this catastrophe was made up by her knowledge that so many smart and caring people were saving the world. And of course, it was likely that all this would spell doom for the Devil called Donald Trump.

“OK, Marissa, there’s a knock at the door,” said Frenchie one day. “Outside is Governor Newsome, Jake Taper, and Anthony Fauci. You’re told that you can fuck one of them. Which one would it be?”

Marissa laughed; her friend’s mind lived deeply in the sewer. “I’m still going with Fauci,” Marissa laughed. “He may be old, but he’s so damned cute and smart.”

That was all twenty-five years ago. Marissa never stopped being a compliant COVID patriot. She wore her N-95 even beyond when it was required. She received every booster she could and, when she did get COVID despite her boosting and masking, she quickly took the drug Paxlovid as Fauci and the CDC and every brilliant doctor on TV told her to do. That she developed worse symptoms after that only made her think that it would all have been worse had she not been boosted and masked and drugged.

Time moved forward. She met Ben online; he was a young biochemist working at Pfizer. It would be a decade and a few million dollars later that he left Pfizer with his stock options and took a lower paying job at the CDC, where many Pfizer and Roache and Merk executives ran the roost. The state of emergency waxed and waned but never disappeared. More variants popped up, other viruses like Monkey Pox and a resurgence of polio, a host of illnesses crashed into the world as though God were trying to kill off the human race.

“God versus the CDC,” laughed Ben. “Thankfully, as long as everyone stays compliant, the CDC I think will win this one. God may be trying to hit us with a flood, but this time Noah has a bunch of smart scientists on his side and will keep the human race alive.”

Eight years into the state of emergency Congress appointed a Committee of Experts to help the nation navigate through God’s flood. The Committee, which worked closely with the Gates Foundation and the World Health Organization, would have extraordinary powers to pass legislation to keep the nation safe in case of crisis, and given that the crisis continued to escalate and dominate the airways and the hearts and minds of sensible Americans, the committee essentially became a fourth branch of the government. Ten years into the state of emergency, after many in congress lost their jobs due to laws prohibiting misinformation and lack of compliance with scientific protocol, the newly constructed Congress and President Scanlon—a fellow student with Marissa at Georgetown Law who had vaulted into prominence

by helping script laws to punish medical offenders—pushed through two amendments to the Constitution. Amendment 28 gave the Committee of Experts powers beyond what prior laws had allowed, powers that essentially made the committee more powerful than either of the other three branches. Amendment 29 codified new life laws, including the doctor law with which Marissa had been compliant but many people in the nation had eschewed.

The Committee became the nation, and it also came close to sleeping in Marissa's bed with her.

"Do you have a chance?" Marissa asked Ben one day in bed. "You're so far up in the CDC, everyone loves you and your work. Maybe if you rub some backs, it could work out for you?"

Ben kissed his wife, more a peck than a kiss, and then started scrolling through his phone. "Lots of politics, Mar. My brother has been an ass and has gotten into trouble so many damned times that he alone may block my nomination. They want committee members to be completely clean, including their families. You're a gem, you've been perfect, but my damned brother, that could sink me. I'm not pushing it. Dr. Strock put in a good word for me, but there are thousands of people who want to sit on the committee, so the last thing they want is a shmuck like me with a noncompliant brother."

Ben never did get appointed to the Committee of Experts, either as a member or an advisor. Many others soared past him. He didn't know why. But as the years pushed on, as the state of emergency expanded, as the life laws became ingrained into fabric of existence of every American, Ben seethed with resentment. Marissa was sure he was having affairs. He remained a good dad, instilling both kids with a plentiful dose of his brilliance and wit, but he drifted away from Marissa and started to ignore her entirely. It was an empty life for her, especially when the kids moved out. She hated coming home. Hated being at work. She continued to comply with all the laws, still retained faith in the scientists and still watched CNN religiously, which was now required, but perhaps she was a bit less enthusiastic about the new world order than Ben would have liked. *Does Ben think I am keeping him down? Maybe he wants to marry someone with more clout? Someone other than boring me?*

Self-doubt filled her. She visited her doctor every month as the life law demanded, and she liked going. She had a very good doctor, one who laughed with her. She used to smoke a bit in college, then quit, but now found herself stealing cigarettes from time to time. It became her solace. She told her doctor about it, because that was required and if God-forbid her chip or someone who didn't like her reported that she snuck a cigarette her or there, that could sink her. The doctor laughed.

"Between me and you, Mrs. Chen," he said, pulling out a pack of Salem's. "I started up again too. Lots of us are. And why not? Given all the medical advances, there's really no reason to deny yourself pleasure. Eat what you want, smoke to your heart's desire, have some cocktails or a few dozen at dinner. As my icon Professor Carnage likes to say, we got a pill for that, no matter what *that* is. And besides," he smiled, lighting a cigarette and handing one to Marissa, who lit one too, "we're helping the economy, right? Don't want those tobacco farmers and tobacco companies going under. Hell, I have stock in lots of vices. And they are doing damned well. So every puff in my lungs is a dollar in my pocket!"

She sucked in the smoke long and deep. With every puff she thought about her unhappiness and her bad marriage. She moved out of the house one day; it was all too much for her, and she must have smoked a carton that weekend. And then she stopped. It was just so stupid. She didn't need to

become a prisoner to damned nicotine; the world trapped her enough without all of that. Still, for having smoked even the bit she did, she now had to take daily pills that helped to kill cancer cells; add that to her twelve others for her high cholesterol, pre-diabetes, osteopenia, marginal blood pressure, thinning hair, fungal toenails, anger problems, slightly elevated weight, and a few other things that her doctor's thorough testing uncovered. Each year now for another decade she would have to go through a PET-MRI to detect any latent cancer cells, and to treat anything uncovered. She continued with her monthly blood tests and her periodic breast MRI's, bone density screening, the patented safe-heart tri-test that her doctor loved so much, colon screening scans, bi-annual total body CT-MRI-PET, and of course monthly exams by her regular doctor and dozen specialists.

"What a wonderful world we live in," smiled the doctor, lighting another one. "Soon all sickness, all disease, all vermin that threaten humanity will be eradicated by our technology and brilliance. I'm on over twenty-five drugs, I eat what I want, I smoke, I hate to exercise, none of it matters. I will live forever, that much I can tell you!"

Which, it turns out, was not true. A few years later the good doctor would discover a lung mass on his scan. He immediately doubled his CA-Kill pills and subjected himself to a biopsy. But somehow during the procedure his heart stopped, and he bled into his lungs and he died. The good news was that the lung mass proved to be non-cancerous. The bad news was that he didn't live long enough to hear the good news. But that was in the future. Early on her 50th birthday, she called the doctor's office to make an appointment, and was thrilled to learn that he had a virtual slot in the morning.

She certainly was not going to walk to his office, not with all the eyes and ears glaring at her. She was probably the most coveted target in the entire neighborhood. Yesterday she went to sleep so excited about what today would bring. She even hoped to get one of the Life Devices that two of her best friends, including Frenchie, proudly touted on their fiftieth birthdays. The devices arrived on the morning of everyone's fiftieth birthday with instructions. Frenchie ran right over to Marissa's house on the morning of her birthday to show it hers off.

"Kind of amazing, right?" Frenchie said. "Apparently if I find someone with a rotten score, I merely get within a few feet of them and pull the trigger. That will instigate a viral reaction in their bodies that will kill them within a few days. Very humanitarian; much better than when they used to send us guns and tell us to shoot people. This way they have a few days to be with their families and make amends. If you can find a really non-compliant asshole and get to him before someone else does, that's an all-out bonanza. Expunging them not only gives me a pass on my obligation, but also protects all my kids from any retribution should they make a mistake and increases their score. I'm holding out until I find one of those. I'll even travel around and look for one. Apparently, the red states are cluttered with them!"

Tonight she wouldn't have to travel too far for what she desired. Not only had Marissa been given a score on her chip that made her into just the kind of victim Frenchie sought to "expunge," but too she received no device, nothing other than a warning: *Be careful, there is no going back, put your affairs in order, and be brave. Your life for the life of the state is a trade that should make you proud.*

Jessica's card came too, as well as a few dozen more. They were all very benign. IT seemed that no one knew, no one other than Charley and anyone who even so much as looked her up on their mobile devices. Many people did just that. They checked the scores of anyone turning fifty, and when they

found a good victim, they pounced. Marissa noted early in the day that she could no longer lock her house or car doors. She was prey now. Anyone could enter her life at any time and “expunge” her.

She saw eyes staring back at her from everywhere.

Her heart raced and every fiber of her being squirmed. How could she have scored so low? Certainly, her medical grade had to be impeccable. She had always been on the correct side of every issue, always supported the biostate, always chided those who eschewed masks and other necessities of life. She took the standardized test just a few days ago and seemed to ace it. What could this be about? Was it a mistake? And if so, did she have time to rectify it?

Hence, her meeting with the doctor, and her decision to see him virtually. She feared leaving the house, even though her safety certainly wasn’t guaranteed in here either.

On her wall sat a poster of the daily science prayer juxtaposed with a portrait of her hero, Anthony Fauci. She read the prayer to herself and out loud. *Thank you, scientists, for all you do, to save our lives with your wisdom, our bodies we offer for your protection, now and forever, no questions asked.* The army of CNN correspondents extolled the accomplishments of the first twenty-five years of the state of exception called the Viral Emergency. “We are living longer and better, disease and infection are drifting away, and the bad guys are now accountable for their actions,” said an aging Tad Jagger, one of the most enthusiastic correspondents when the viral emergency began, and still its greatest spokesman. “It won’t be long until misinformation, anti-science actions, and noncompliance with the world’s health and safety standards will too be eradicated by everything we’ve been doing. We are so lucky to be in this glorious age. Let us all take a moment of silence, recite the science prayer, and kiss the head of Dr. Fauci.”

She went through the motions almost mechanically, as she did many times a day. *Am I one of misinforming anti-science people who would be eradicated,* she thought. *How could it be?*

Nothing made sense to her as she paced around, staring out the window, taping them down, placing chairs in front of her door. Should she call Frenchie? If she did, she threatened to sully her best friend’s score; mere association with someone like Marissa could sink a person quicker than an iceberg. Or Frenchie could end her life. If she had to die, why not let Frenchie do it?

Her computer buzzed. It was the doctor. She slid her home monitoring system close by and attached herself to its many probes.

The doctor was not his usual jovial self. He held his cigarette nervously, flicking ashes, staring at the ground. Finally he uttered, “You can move your arms out of the device, we have your vitals and readings, very good as usual, for what that’s worth.”

Of course he knew. *For what’s that worth.* Doctors knew everything. They had to!

“What do you want today, Ms. Chen?” he asked.

Mrs Chen? She had always been Marissa. Just a little flirting always swam beneath the surface of their relationship. But not today.

“My score came in,” she said coldly, some tears welling in her eyes. “It wasn’t what I expected, doctor.”

“Nor what I expected,” he said. “I had thought you were a decent, caring, compliant person. I guess there’s a part of you that evaded my glare. A dark part. You were very good at hiding it. Had I noticed any aberrant behavior I would have tried to intervene.”

How could she respond to that? “Look,” she merely uttered. “I haven’t done anything wrong. I’ve been more compliant than the Pope is during Easter. I just need to know, were there any medical issues that could have given me this score? Anything you may have reported or even written in the chart that would have pinned me as someone who is noncompliant? Because I have always done everything you’ve asked of me, I’ve always been a good patient.”

At this point she was balling, but the doctor’s face didn’t change one bit. It was stern, judgmental. Nothing she said to him would change his verdict.

“No, Mrs. Chen, as far as we are concerned in this office, you have been a very good patient. This didn’t come from us. Is there anything else I can help you with?”

Yes, she screamed at him through her tears, if only in her mind. *Tell me what the fuck is going on!*

She sat in her home, petrified. She didn’t dare meander out in the world, where her signal of shame would be broadcast for miles. Once someone’s score plummeted as had hers, the electronic safety systems on someone’s home and car became disabled, usually people’s bank was depleted of all funds, credit cards became invalidated. She had some cash, but not enough to live, and regardless, most places didn’t accept cash. She thought about calling her kids. Telling them about this. Maybe they could help. At the very least, she wanted to say goodbye.

Just then, Frenchie burst in. Frenchie’s face was blank; her many wrinkles hid behind her large, blue mask, and her eyes seemed tired. Today was a mask day to commemorate the 25th anniversary of the state of emergency. Marissa would usually have been wearing one, but, as her doctor likely would tell her, what’s the point?

But Frenchie almost indignantly covered Marissa’s face with a mask. She then ravaged the kitchen, she pulled out some aluminum foil, she soaked a washcloth in water, she grabbed some duct tape. Meticulously she wrapped Marissa’s left wrist with the foil, and then lay the wet cloth over the foil, draping on a dozen layers of duct tape. She took out her phone and Marissa’s and left them on the table. Then she grabbed Marissa’s right arm and pulled her into the bathroom, locking the door.

“What the hell, Mar, what the fucking hell?” she stared at her friend viciously. “What, have you had some secret subversive life behind my back? Normal people don’t get scores like that. Even half bad people don’t. What the hell did you do?”

Marissa merely shrugged. “I didn’t do anything, Frenchie. I don’t get it.”

Frenchie shook her head. “Well, obviously you did something. You must have said something. Or did something. Or pissed someone off. How are your medical records? Did you botch the multiple-choice test? We have to be able to do something about this.”

“Why don’t you just do it, Frenchie,” she asked her friend, quite seriously. “Use your device on me. You said you were looking for someone to score you big points, get your family protected, get you protected.

Well, open your eyes, I'm standing right in front of you. Just do it. Someone will regardless and it's likely going to be soon. You might as well get the benefit of the kill."

"Oh, that's bullshit Marissa, obviously I'm not doing it," she said. "What did you do wrong?"

"Nothing!" She cried out. She peered out the window; she could see eyes glaring at her from everywhere, voracious eyes; she imagined scores of hungry souls ready to reap the benefits of her disgrace. "I didn't do anything wrong. My doctor says I'm perfect. Clearly I nailed the multiple choice test, which was easy as shit, and you know I'm damned good at those. And I am totally observant with the new science, and I have always been, and you know it."

"Maybe something went wrong with the test," Frenchie suggested. "Did you call them?"

"Call who?" Marissa yelled at her friend, frustrated by the situation and her friend's unwillingness to believe her. "I did great on that test, I am sure of it. And its not like there's anyone to call. There's no one in those testing centers. The whole thing is done by computers. What, do I call one of them, one of the computers, and plead with her?"

Frenchie paced. "Someone hates you," she finally said. "Someone with power."

And as though those few words opened a door, the two best friends peered into each other's eyes, and muttered a single syllable simultaneously.

"Ben."

"But he wouldn't do that to the mother of his kids," Marissa said. "I know him."

"He's a wounded animal, Marissa," she said. "A wounded animal with power. Men are assholes. They don't take getting dumped very well. I have no doubt he did it. You have to talk to him."

"I can't talk to him, not after everything we've been through."

"Oh, sure, that's very rational, Mar. Best to just die, right? Best to spend your life being perfect and then dying as a sinner because you're too proud to talk to your damned ex. Come on!"

A million thoughts raced through Marissa's mind. Should she call Charley? Call Ben directly? She knew some of Ben's friends. It was very unlikely she would even live long enough to make this right, even if she could. Then she lifted her arm.

"Whatever you did to me, will this protect me if I drive to Ben's and ask him directly?" Marissa asked her friend. "Otherwise I'd be dead within a block of here. And no way Ben is talking on the phone."

Frenchie took a deep breath. Already by being here, Marissa knew, Frenchie's scores themselves could suffer. If she had done something to somehow block Marissa's chip, that could be a federal offense. So, Frenchie said nothing other than, "We'll be here for your party tonight. You need to have a party. And we all bought you nice gifts. The others don't have to know. Keep the arm wet. The duct tape should hold. And call Ben! Please! We will be here in two hours. Pretend like you're surprised."

"Surprised?" Marissa said with a huge smile and tears rushing down her cheeks. "I think I've had enough surprises for one day!"

Frenchie hugged her tightly and for quite some time. The two of them shed an ocean of tears. Then Frenchie pushed her away and started into her red streaked eyes. "I love you, don't ever forget that. And we'll figure this out. Call Ben. Just do that for me. And stay safe. Tape down your windows and block your door with a chair. Keep your phone away from you. I'll be back in a couple of hours. We'll have a nice birthday party. We'll keep you safe."

Marissa nodded up and down. What else could she even do?

She barricaded her door and soaked her wrist in warm water every hour. She applied some more duct tape. She paced back and forth, staring out her window, eyes swam around the darkness, vulturous eyes, hungry eyes. Time ticked away. In some ways, this party would be a test. Would her friends notice the score? Or was Frenchie's little trick effective?

She walked to Dr. Fauci's portrait that hang on her wall and talked to it. "I thought you were my friend!" she said. "You know I've worshipped you! Why are you doing this to me?" Fauci didn't answer back, and Marissa just laughed. "I'll tell you this, Tony. Turning 50 is certainly a bitch!"

The party fluttered past Marissa's preoccupied mind. None of the girls seemed to notice. Only one of them had turned fifty and had a device, but theoretically anyone with a chip—which was pretty much everyone on planet earth—could read her score. One of her friends asked to see her device, and she slyly stated that she wasn't allowed to show it to anyone until it was calibrated. Two of them already had devices and questioned Marissa. "New rules," Marissa said, and they nodded.

"Did you call Ben?" Frenchie asked during a kitchen break. "And keep you damned wrist wet!"

"Not yet," Marissa said. "But I will. I promise. Or I'll drive there."

She didn't drink at all, something her friends seemed to notice. She showed little emotion, opening the presents and giving pat responses, "Oh, this is perfect, thank you," after each one. They had cake, Marissa took a bite. Time marched forward. She just wanted them to leave. Which, finally, they did, Frenchie too. All of them seemed to forget about the comedy club in Bethesda.

"If I can't fix this," Marissa said as her final words to her best friend. "I want you to be the one to pull the trigger. Promise me that."

Frenchie nodded up and down. "We will fix this," she said. "We have to."

She didn't sleep that night, peering outside, soaking her wrist, checking a dozen times that her door was jammed shut. She called her kids again. Charley didn't answer. Jessica did and spoke for an hour, mostly about her research. Clearly she didn't know. Should Marissa tell her?

Not now. Not yet. She kept delaying the inevitable. She needed to call Ben.

She saw eyes glaring at her from every nook in the house, out of every window, the ceiling, under the bed. Had someone come in? She checked the door again. What about the windows? She paced, moving from one window to another, one part of the house to another. She hyperventilated. She sat on the couch, peering into darkness. Then she laughed.

"My God, they said turning fifty was rotten," she said to the walls. "But I didn't realize it was this bad."

When a crack of sun slipped through her basement window, she decided to call Ben. She breathed a few times, trying to calm herself. She hadn't called him since the separation. He must know it was her birthday. He must know what fate befell her. Would he even answer? What would she say.

"My long lost wife is calling me before I can even open my eyes," he said, picking up almost immediately. "Either this is very bad news you want to tell me or you just want to tell me how much you miss me. Even when we were married you wouldn't talk to me this early in the morning."

The mere sound of his voice knocked Marissa off any perch of maudlin concern for her husband. Boy did she hate him! So snide, so condescending! "You know why I'm calling," is all she said.

"Sure, I know Mar, I know everything. Glad you think I'm so smart. I actually don't know the fuck why you are calling me. I can't imagine any reason you'd be calling me."

She paused. "My rating," she said, softly. "It came out yesterday. On my birthday."

"I'm sure it did," he said. "You calling to gloat?"

"Then you don't know?" she asked him. "You don't know what happened to me?"

"I'm sure you don't have a low score. What is it?"

And so, she told him. At first he laughed, then said there must be some mistake. He asked if she screwed up the multiple-choice test, but then realized that was impossible. "You are the queen of standardized testing," he laughed. Did she do something against the rules, say something scientifically offensive, engage in any form of misinformation? Anything at all?

"No, of course not," she said. And then she paused a moment. "Did you do this to me?"

"God, Mar, you still blaming me for your life sucking? Get off your fucking high horse already. I don't know why in hell your score is so low, and I feel bad for you, I really do, but guess what, it's not good for me either. Your bad score impacts me. It will lower my score. It will block my chances of moving up in this fucking job I have. Why in the hell would I want to do that?"

"Then," she asked. "Can you help me?"

He said nothing for a while. He was breathing loudly. "Let me poke around," he said. "But it's unlikely. It's a fucking mess. God damned, Marissa, what the hell did you do?"

At that point she started crying. And she said something that popped into her head, because as bad as she felt for herself, she suddenly felt worse for Ben, for her kids, for her friends, for anyone who was associated with her. She alone could bring them all down. "If you can't fix it, Ben, do me one last favor. You be the one who pulls the trigger. If you do it, think of how it will help you and the kids! Think of all the good that will come of it! Someone is going to do it. I want it to be you."

He laughed. "Whatever, Marissa, I see you are no less insane than ever. One step at a time. First, don't leave the house. Second, let me look into this. Third, everything we've just discussed is discoverable by the ears. Just so you know that. This is the world we live in. It's kept us safe for twenty-five years. But there's a price we all have to pay for that safety. And unfortunately, your price is now very high. You have to look at it that way. If they think you're a bad egg, then you're a bad egg. Unless I find some

obvious error, there's nothing I can do. It's the will of science. And yes, I will be happy to pull the trigger. Goodbye."

Just like that. So callous. Should she let him do it? She would rather it be Frenchie!

Just then she heard her front door being pushed. She dashed upstairs to her bedroom; several cars were parked outside, and someone was trying to get in. Her heart suddenly tripped over itself in her chest. They had found her so fast! *This damned foil and water trick is for the birds!* Others would be here too. Could she get out the back? She ran to the back bedroom, no one was there yet. She dashed downstairs and out the back door, leaped over a fence, ran for a good mile, hyperventilating. She was still in her party dress, still in her high heels. None of that matter. Maybe she could hide in the woods.

She crossed the street and kept running. There was a park not too far away. How far could people detect her, she wondered? Was there anywhere she could be safe?

She saw eyes in the trees, popping up from the manhole, peering out of every passing car.

Just how far could these devices fire and instigate my demise? How close does my killer have to be?

The woods led to a big river, and there she could find some trails into the depth of the forest, even up one of the hills, there were supposed to be caves a few miles downstream. Should she bring her phone? Wasn't that a way for them to track her. *Who cares; they can find me with my chip, they can probably find me a dozen other ways.* Plus, she might want to call Ben or Frenchie. She might want to say goodbye to her kids.

So many eyes, staring at her, so hungry! Where could she even go?

The sun was now high in the sky, it was warm. The leaves on the trees rustled just a bit. Such a bucolic spot. But safe? Most of her life she feared the virus. She feared disease and sickness. She feared something befalling her kids. Now she feared earth itself. She feared existence.

She closed her eyes for a moment. A moment turned into an hour, and then two. She was fast asleep. Nature moved on, not caring about the many biologic threats, the quarter century state of emergency, or Marissa's predicament. Nature swam around the vicissitudes of human madness. It moved aside when the humans burst through, and then it recouped its place. In the end, nature would win, humanity would destroy itself. This Marissa knew, and she dreamed that she was lying in a stream, she was the stream, she was immobile, cold, people walked through her, then some animals, she was unmoved.

And then, just like that, she heard something, and her eyes popped up. She panicked, stood up, and then fell. She could see a silhouette of a man approaching her fast, through the shadows. She pushed herself up again and prepared to run.

"If you want to live you'll stay put," said a gruffy voice, as the man moved closer. "You have no chance Marissa. I'm your chance. You run, it's over."

Marissa stopped for a moment, although every instinct in her body told her to keep going. Of course he would say that; he wants to be the one to end her life. Who wouldn't? She wondered what time it was. Had someone called her? Maybe Ben fixed this.

She stepped back. “How do you know my name?” she asked the figure, who was close enough to see and had stopped moving toward her. “I know what you want. I won’t let you do it!”

How close did they have to get? Maybe he pulled the trigger already.

“Do you recognize me?” he said. “I promise you, I don’t intend to pull any trigger. You are safe. It’s hard to trust anyone these days, but I hope you hear in my voice that I’m being sincere.”

Marissa was hyperventilating. Why not just let this shmuck do it? Who even cares? How long could she possibly run? And the odds of her getting to Ben or Frenchie without someone else pulling the trigger were low. Once pulled, she’d have a couple days to put her affairs in order, to tell her kids. A couple days to relax, to be free of the omnipresent eyes.

She stared at him and then laughed. “Well you look like Mick Medicine, the guy from TV, but of course you’re not him. So no, I don’t know you.”

Mick Medicine, as he was known (although that wasn’t his real name), grew up in the pandemic that instigated the state of emergency. He worked with Anthony Fauci and the others, usually in the background, but when Fauci retired, and when new surges slapped the world around and led to the formation of the Committee of Experts, Mick Medicine, or M&M as he was known, became the face of the Committee. He was on TV every night discussing new measures to fight the virus, fight disease, change the world to make it a safer place. He was both soothing and funny all at once; Americans believed and trusted him. Marissa loved him. She often said, after Fauci died, that M&M was her new heart throb. “I’d take him over Ben any day,” she whispered to Frenchie when she was a bit drunk. “He’s divorce worthy.”

Maybe it was quips like those that doomed her to this low score!

“Can I come closer? I am Mick Medicine; you’re not fooling yourself. Can I come closer?”

“How can you be?” she asked, as the man—disheveled, wearing a hat and rags for clothes—approached. “Why would you be out here?”

Soon he was beside her. No question, this was him. The very shock of it hardly registered on this crazy of days. How lovely would it be for her hero to pull the trigger! Maybe this was her birthday gift?

“I know your score is for shit,” he said to her. “I can’t read it personally, but I know about it. And you probably can’t see my score either, but let’s just say, it took a bit of a dive in the last 24 hours.”

“What do you know about me?” she asked him, trembling just a bit. “Do you know why my score is so low? I did nothing wrong! Was it my husband who did this, my ex-husband? Do you know him? Do you know Ben? Was he the one?”

Mick nodded side to side and smiled. “You are very naïve, my dear,” he laughed. “All these years you probably applauded as some of the bad ones had their lives ended, you cheered for mandates and masks, you simply adored the deep state that has placed us into this giant test tube. The perfect world, right? Until it comes out and bites you. What do you think now? Is it all fair? Is this a world you dream of living in? Everyone safe, healthy? Are they really? Or is that a bunch of crap too?”

“What are you even saying?” she snapped back at him. “You’re the guy who sold it! Of course it’s all good, all necessary. Is this a test or something?”

He laughed again, as wind jumped from tree to tree, just enough to deflect the intensifying heat of the day. “A test? On your birthday? During this seminal moment, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the state of emergency? Why would you think that? I am as much a victim as you, my dear. What if I told you something that will sound so bizarre as to make your toes curl? Let’s say that every day a few hundred names are pulled from a hat, names of good and worthy people, people about to turn fifty, and those unlucky souls have their scores desecrated in the name of biosecurity? Because Mrs. Chen, think of how effective it is when someone like you gets buried by the system. You who did everything right, you the greatest cheerleader we have, now has to watch your back because you failed. We do it to keep everyone on guard. We do it so no one dares take any chances. Think of how your friends and family will behave now, think of how frightened and on guard they will be. We need to keep people on their toes. Mask days, surges, reports of our wonderful outcomes, that only goes so far. You, my dear, are a necessary peg to be yanked out of your comfortable hole and tossed into the fire.”

“That’s just not true,” she said. *How could it be?*

“And yet,” he said with a smile. “It is. It is for you. It is for me. I found you because I saw them do it to you. I know who your husband is. Maybe they were trying to get to him through you, keep him down by destroying your reputation. Who knows. It could have been arbitrary. That’s why I’m here. I have had about enough. Enough of the ground, the air, the stars. This whole place. So, I left, and I’m planning to disappear. But I hate to be alone. So I figured, what the hell, maybe you want to join me?”

The river flowed toward the Bay, and from there, into the Atlantic and its depths. Beneath the water lay an entire universe that knew nothing of what transpired above. There were no viruses down there, no masking, no mandates. The 3 M’s meandered over rocks toward that one goal, to the water, where M&M promised M some salvation. What the hell, she figured. She was going to die one way or another, might as well make an adventure of it for her fiftieth birthday! And somewhere in the back of Marissa’s brain she thought: maybe this has all been set up as a gift for me, maybe this is just a big production and in the end she will take a selfie with her hero M&M and her real score will emerge.

Maybe. It didn’t matter. M&M rubbed a greasy substance on her wrist. “Foil and washcloths?” he laughed. “How did you think that would protect you? This stuff, this will actually work. For a while at least. We have a long road ahead. Hope you like dirty jokes?”

She didn’t, but it didn’t matter. Her mind remained too cluttered to care. Step by step over mud and roots and rocks, in and out of the river, hiding behind trees when bikers or hikers passed by, sucking down some protein drinks he had in his backpack.

Unbeknownst to her, Marissa was diving right into the heart of the biostate. This man promised her an escape, but you can’t escape from the air itself. Somehow she would have to find some bridge to somewhere else, some path to something she did not understand. But today was not that day. And so, she walked. What else could she do. *Happy birthday to me!* She laughed. His mouth never stopped moving. And she never stopping surveying the landscape for all those eyes and ears.