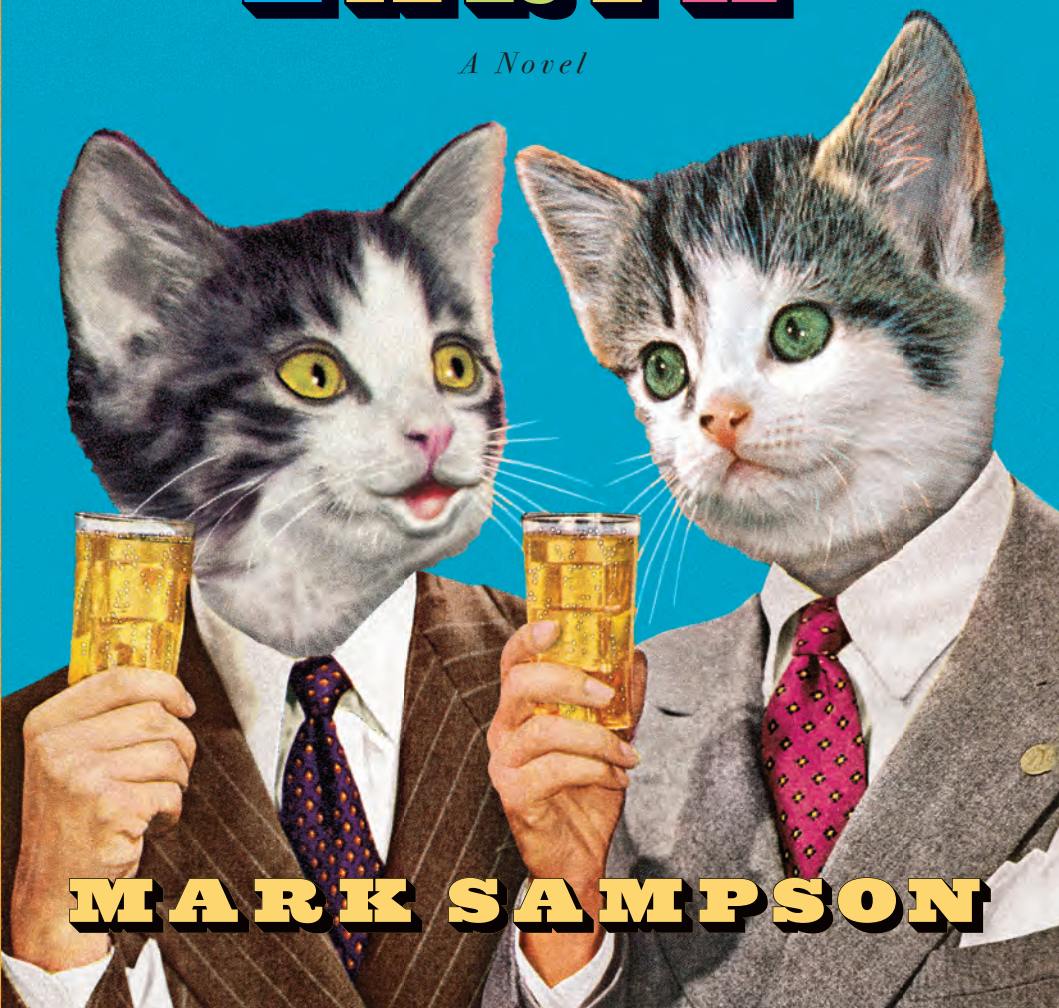


ALL
THE
ANIMALS
ON
EARTH

A Novel



MARK SAMPSON

ALL
THE
ANIMALS
ON
EARTH

ALSO BY MARK SAMPSON

FICTION

Off Book

Sad Peninsula

The Secrets Men Keep

The Slip

POETRY

Weathervane

**ALL
THE
ANIMALS
ON
EARTH**

A Novel



A BUCKRIDER BOOK

MARK SAMPSON

This is a work of fiction. All characters, organizations, places and events portrayed are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead; events or locales is entirely coincidental.

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for Rebecca

PART 1:

THE

ACCIDENT

CHAPTER 1

The accident was alarming in its brevity. The concise screech of tires. The crackling smash of metal on metal. My Corolla's twelve-foot lurch into the (thankfully) unoccupied intersection despite my foot planted firmly on the brake. It was a frigid January evening, and I'd been stopped at a red light on the corner of Sherbourne and Highway 2 when this butterscotch-coloured pickup truck hit a rind of black ice and sailed right into my bumper. The next thing I knew, my neck was twanging with whiplash and I had the wind knocked out of me after slamming sternum first into my deploying airbag.

Because I work for an insurance company, I knew, even in those first fretful moments, just how ordinary this accident was. Fender-benders happened all the time in our city, especially during winter when the streets and roads were unpredictably slick. The guy who hit me, despite having a pair of rubber testicles dangling from his hitch and a small, discreet Confederate flag decal on his back window, was incredibly apologetic and kind in the moments after our accident.

"Ah jeez, mister, I'm sorry . . . I'm so sorry . . ." he kept saying as he waited for the good folks at nine-one-one to come on the line of his cellphone. I waved off his concerns with several *Don't worry about it* sways of my hand, even as pain ricocheted round my neck

and shock passed like voltage through my blood. Our collision had drawn notice from the homeless people who congregated under the single, sad overpass down here, the ones who often wandered up and down the light traffic paused at the stoplight, pleading for spare change. This part of the Lake Shore was one of the many impoverished neighbourhoods in our city, a place of drab, leaky concrete and empty, garbage-strewn lots, a strip of highway where a lone bus, the number seventy-five, passed through but once an hour. The resident vagrants approached us with curiosity and concern, but like I said, there was nothing unusual about our crash. The truck's driver seemed pleased when I told him I worked for Percussive Insurance, up on University Avenue, because that's where his own policy was (home and auto and life bundled together in our popular Assurance One package). Yes, this was going to be a straightforward transaction, a simple swapping of policy numbers. No headache at all.

I was really shaken up, though. The EMTs noticed it right away and, as a precaution, decided to give me a lift to the Sisters of St. Patrick, our city's lone Catholic hospital. I was in too much agony by then to protest. I did manage to call Morgana, my wife of thirteen years, to tell her what had happened and where I was headed. Her voice gave off a spritely pop of worry at first, but then quickly modulated into her schoolteacher calm as we discussed how to deal with our now towed-away and totalled Corolla, and how long it would take for her to come down on transit and meet me at St Pat's.

The hospital lounge was near empty – just one pimply teenager in a Burger King uniform cupping a shopping bag full of ice to his forearm, and a middle-aged woman whose “emergency” seemed entirely mental – and yet the wait felt unending. How many doctors would be staffing the ER at this hour? Two, maybe three? As I sat on my cheap vinyl seat and tried to keep my wrenched body still, as per the EMTs' instructions, my eyes gravitated toward a large poster hanging in front of me on the

lounge wall. It was one of those posters you wanted to look away from the instant you glimpsed it but couldn't, thanks to its sheer audacity. It showed a young, pretty woman in her late twenties, radiantly Caucasian and infinitely smug, resting one light hand upon the shelf of her swollen stomach. With tilted head and downcast gaze, she stared at that massive bump with an understated smile as God's great light glowed like a sunrise cresting the horizon behind her. The message read:

HAVE
YOU
CONSIDERED
CONCEPTION?

Jesus Murphy, I thought. *Bloody Catholics*. Here we all were, in this dingy lounge with our whiplashed necks and scalded flesh and broken minds, and they were foisting *this* nonsense at us. Had the nuns no decency? I should have insisted the EMTs take me to the General instead, where my sensibilities would not be subjected to something so vulgar.

Morgana eventually arrived, still dressed for school in her smart, earth-coloured pantsuit. "Oh honey, honey, are you *okay*?" she asked as she sat down next to me. "I'm fine," I replied. "Just . . . you know, more rattled than anything." Her hug was gentle, but I still winced within its grasp. She laced her fingers into mine and got me to briefly recount the details of the accident. Then, to no doubt distract me from my pain, she began describing *her* day to me, in all its joys and convolutions. Morgana, being Morgana, had already started to get her grade four music class jonesed about the upcoming Spring Fling triple-threat recital. Today, she had even conscripted one of her fellow teachers to join her in a mock concert in front of the tiny class, showing how one could combine singing, acting and dancing into a performative extravaganza. I imagined the kiddies watching on with looks of amusement, bemusement or indifference as she and her co-worker minced

and pranced around in front of them. There were just eight other teachers at the school where Morgana taught, but in the stories she told, she could make them sound like a cast of thousands. It was so important to my wife that this tiny coterie of colleagues also be some of her closest friends. They had garden club; they had movie night; they had drinks at Kelsey's once a month. Morgana could relay the most specific and even intimate aspects of their lives at will. I always felt bad that, even after a decade, I still struggled to keep their names straight, these people my wife worked so hard, with middling success, to be close to.

The interminable wait soon took the wind from my wife's sails, and we sat in silence for a while. The Burger King kid ordered himself a pop from the Pepsi machine in the corner, the can emerging from the wide slot on its own tiny drone and buzzing its way into his waiting hand mere seconds after he hit SEND. Meanwhile, a nurse in teal scrubs – the lone attendant for this floor, it seemed – shuffled by wordlessly. Before long, Morgana's eyes strayed up to the poster on the wall. She too gave a shudder of revulsion, and she *works* with children all day.

After what felt like an epoch, the nurse summoned me to follow her. "Your wife can come too, if you like." So Morgana accompanied me into the little office and helped me climb gingerly onto the examining table. The physician who arrived – after another lengthy wait, I might add – was positively geriatric. With his frizzy grey hair and brittle physique and gremlin face, he had to be ninety if he was a day. He went about the rote business of diagnosing me: acute whiplash and a bruised rib. He got the nurse to fetch me a neck brace and wrote a prescription for Tylenol 3. It all took less than five minutes.

"Yes, but what about the shock?" I asked.

"You're not in shock," he replied. "Shock has a very clinical definition."

"No, no, I mean . . ." I raised my hands and made the jittery gesture.

“That will pass,” he told me.

Morgana helped me down off the table and we gathered up our stuff. The doc had turned to go, but then he turned back. “Oh sorry,” he said, “but I’m obligated to give you *this* before you leave.” From the clear plastic rack next to his blood pressure machine, he pulled out a pamphlet and handed it to me. My stomach lurched as I turned it toward my face. On its folded front cover read the words:

CONSIDER GIVING THE WORLD
THE GIFT OF LIFE

And beneath this was a picture of a fetus, coiled up like a veiny, translucent peanut on a vine, its out-of-proportion eyes all black and alien.

Oh, for mercy’s sake! I thought.

Indeed, Morgana and I made a point of chucking the pamphlet into a trash bin the moment we stepped outside the ER’s automated doors. That broad bucket, we noticed, was already overflowing with these brochures, a thousand unloved and rejected fetuses staring up at us. Then we grabbed an orange taxi to take us home to our spacious condo unit in the sky, an expansive gondola that overlooked this wide, hollow city.



Morgana was sweet and efficient as I lay at home in a neck brace during my brief convalescence. She said not to worry about the car, or the days I was taking off work, or my share of the chores around our condo. She would look after everything while I healed. This proved to be an adjustment for us both. I’d never been seriously injured before, never been seriously *ill* before, and, I had to admit, didn’t cope with feelings of helplessness all that well. This entertained more than annoyed my wife. Morgana’s eyes would sparkle with amusement as she watched me struggle with simple tasks like putting on my own socks or reaching for a mixing bowl

on its high shelf, grimacing as I did over the invasive strain on my still-whiplashed body. “You know, you don’t have to do that yourself,” she’d say with a smirk.

During my recovery, while she was at work, I spent most of the day flipping around the twenty-four-hour news channels – CBC Newsworld and CNN and BBC International. I was by no means a news junkie, but one could not help but get absorbed in the defining crisis of our time; one could not avert one’s eyes from the Great Catastrophe as it unfolded. The decades-long global economic recession, these channels told me, had reached a breaking point. Nineteen of the world’s twenty largest economies now had double-digit unemployment rates. The price of gold had just hit a massive new high – a bad sign. Economic powerhouses from years gone by – China and Brazil and Germany – had all but collapsed. There was no argument over the source of this entrenched malaise, what billions of people just like me and Morgana all around the world were doing – or, more specifically, *not* doing – to cause it. This was the new climate change; this was the new computer glitch that was going to cause airplanes to literally fall out of the sky. Even those cultures traditionally reliable to “pad out the teams,” so to speak, had embraced the world’s most dominant and pervasive social trend. Imams and rabbis and the Pope stood shoulder to shoulder pleading with people to get with the program. Governments, by and large, felt powerless to stop it. What could they do, make sex mandatory and ban the pill? No. They couldn’t *force* us into anything. All they could do was report the latest mind-boggling statistics: for the last two decades, thirty-nine out of forty couples worldwide aged twenty-two to forty-five chose to be childless, and that figure was on the rise. If this phenomenon continued . . . well . . .

I got squirrely when the news reported that a consortium of scientists from around the world – via direct funding from the private sector – had developed a biochemical workaround to the crisis. They had the technology, the news told me, to alleviate

the problem without compromising people's right to have as few children as they wanted. But the environmentalists were all over it. *Think of the ecological implications!* they screamed during the violent clashes with police that unfolded on my screen. *We'll destroy the planet for sure this time!* Various religious groups became their unlikely allies. *Your Proposal ≠ God's Will!* their own placards hollered. But no matter. The biological workaround was going to happen with or without the masses' consent. Governments would not stand in the way. That was when I had to turn the TV off. This kind of conflict was very much outside my comfort zone, and I longed to be back inside the cocoon of my job.

Before I knew it, the neck brace came off (its inner padding now reeked of old, rancid sweat) and my rib was as good as new. Morgana actually gave me a tiny round of applause on the morning I managed to pull off five toe-touches without blanching in pain. I returned to work. Percussive Insurance, with its two hundred employees, was one of the largest insurance companies in Canada, and I was its HR manager. Very little had changed in my absence. Someone had replaced, without my knowledge or consent, the perfectly serviceable coffee machine in the staff room with a newfangled espresso-dispensing device that looked like a droid from *Star Wars*. Meanwhile, a couple of supervisors had swapped offices and forgotten to submit a personnel update to me for the intranet. Otherwise, the place was as I had left it, and things began returning to normal.

Except the driving. Goddamnit, the *driving*. What was wrong with me? Morgana noticed it right away, how reluctant I was, even after my recovery, to get behind the wheel. (We had a new car now, thanks to Percussive Insurance – a Camry!) Typically, we'd split our driving fifty-fifty, but she found during these days that I would lunge for shotgun whenever we went down to our parking garage.

Part of the problem, I figured, was that we didn't actually use our car very much. We lived right downtown, and our small (some

might call it mid-sized) city on a lake had a fairly decent transit system – an antiquated subway *and* streetcars *and* buses left over from more populous times. It was all very convenient and pleasant to get around; indeed, one could stand on a subway platform, even during rush hour, and not feel crowded or harried. It did feel unnatural, to be honest, to have all this legacy infrastructure at our disposal. Sometimes, there on the platform, I would stare into the dark, wet throat of the subway tunnel and see it not as a place of steel track and cement wall, but as a portal into another dimension, the entrance into a kind of Narnia. I swore I could almost hear the sweaty crowds living in that other world, their angry jostling for position, or their groans of annoyance as a distant PA system announced yet another delay. Me, I was able to *walk* to the offices of Percussive Insurance, and Morgana had just a short subway ride out to the east end to her most obscure of professions – an elementary school music teacher who taught to classes of hardly more than ten children each. We really only used our car for cumbersome chores (I had been buying a new shelving unit from Walmart the night of the crash) or for longer-haul trips down south to wine country or up north for antiquing or visiting our rural friends, Alanna and Mitch. Yes, driving was not a big part of my day-to-day existence, and post-accident, I was a jangle of nerves at the thought of it.

Morgana put up with it for a while, but *three months* was not something she could abide. My physical injuries had healed in good time but this psychological damage, this nettlesome trauma, refused to dissipate. “You can’t *not* drive,” she told me, trying to keep her frustration couched in a kind of jokey insouciance. “You need to be a big boy, Hector, and get over yourself.”

Fine. I would get over myself. I would get myself back behind the wheel.



My first solo excursion that April was to the book club I belonged to, hosted deep in the city’s west end by my friend Rick. I didn’t

actually require a car to get out there – a subway and then a bus would have done it – but I figured this was a safe, familiar journey that wouldn't rattle me too much. I had been a member of this book club for more than seven years now, but I hadn't attended a meeting since my accident. The type of books we read varied, but we tried to stick to a solid "no trash" rule. My recommendations hewed toward military histories and political biographies. Rick, an accountant, liked true crime. Elizabeth, an oft out-of-work librarian and archivist, usually picked the latest award-winning work of literary fiction or even a book of poetry. Rachel, a social worker, chose humour or the occasional well-written celebrity screed.

Yet the selection for this month was a kind of dystopian science fiction novel: *The Children of Men*, by P.D. James. Everyone in the group got a turn picking a book and everyone had a veto, but this choice seemed to be a direct result of my absence, since I often made it clear that I loathed science fiction, and so somebody (Rick didn't say who) managed to squeak it into the queue when I wasn't around. Thankfully, my concerns were unfounded: *The Children of Men* proved a surprisingly smart and gripping read. In the bleak future that James described, mankind was doomed by the simple fact that women could no longer bear children, and this caused the world to slip into chaos and totalitarianism as the population plunged. I found myself struck by the deep moral dilemmas raised when you removed the very concept of posterity, of a future generation for your species, from the equation. *How apt*, I thought, *that a book from so long ago could raise such questions for our generation.*

Indeed, I very much had *The Children of Men* on the brain as I navigated our new Camry through the city's centre and out to the west end. It was just coming on dusk of a Saturday in spring, and the tall, glassy office towers above me were mottled with window light, the blackened vacancies so dominant against the few glowing specks of yellow. The sidewalks I passed were nearly

deserted. A traffic light ahead flashed a sorrowful red, over and over, warning of a four-way stop. When I braked at it, my knuckles squelched into a tense white on the wheel as I braced myself, irrationally, for another abrupt BANG! at my rear end. Just as I was about to pull ahead, a kid on a skateboard came racing down off the curb and through the empty intersection, the scraping sound of his wheels filling the dome of my car. He was maybe fourteen, thin and gangly and with a head of thick, unkempt hair. As I watched him pass, I thought that in *The Children of Men*, he would be too young to even be an Omega, the last generation on Earth to be born and the one that would have to face the human race's extinction head on. *Wouldn't it be terrifying, I thought, to watch as the world's population just dwindled and dwindled until you knew your cohort was the very last one?* But of course, that was not quite *our* world. This kid would almost certainly be capable of procreation, just like the rest of us. But the question was, would he one day *choose* to procreate, to add to the world's population? That was the real dilemma, and one that – if you were to believe the news – the politicians and scientists and Wall Street money men were on the verge of solving through their great and unholy collaboration. All those hours of daytime television had made me hyperaware that a new age, a great demarcation in history, was about to unfold. They were very close to unveiling the great workaround, the one that had been brewing for years in large, industrialized labs in the Mojave Desert and the abandoned industrial parks of Beijing and Rio de Janeiro. The tycoons of Wall Street, due to their substantial investments in this technology, wanted it unveiled in a giant spectacle in their own backyard, and for us all to watch live on our TVs – watch as capitalism once again came to the rescue of the world; watch as the financiers' sad, lonely city glimmered once more with hope.

A horn blared behind me at the intersection.

"You can *go*, moron!" The shout came through an open car window.

Yes, I could go. So I went.



Rick and Rachel and Liz didn't really want to talk about the more intellectual aspects of the novel. Over our cheeseboard and wine (*Just a half glass for me, guys. Yep, that's right – I'm driving again*), all they could do was go on about both the large and minute differences between *The Children of Men* and the film version that had been made from it. I tried to steer the conversation toward the text itself, but Hollywood's allure was just too strong. *We really need some fresh blood in this club*, I thought. *We're all just phoning it in, and have been for a while*. Truth was, we only kept this hobby up because none of us (even Liz) read very much on our own, and we felt guilty about that.

As usual, the discussion of the book was just a brief interlude between two larger chats about things that were not the book. The guys asked how I was feeling, and I said, "Oh fine. Physically, just fine. I'm still a bit skittish behind the wheel, but, you know . . ." and they assured me that this was perfectly natural. We asked Liz about her job at the legal library, but she glumly informed us that her hours had once again been cut and she was uncertain how she'd make her mortgage payments over the coming months. We asked Rachel about her clinical work, but there wasn't much to tell. The people who needed her help were few and far between. I wanted to tie all this back to *The Children of Men*, our own current predicament, and what was most certainly looming to resolve it. There was an obvious confluence, wasn't there? Had we, the childless masses across the globe, given up on the point of posterity and grown blithely willing to sacrifice history for our own selfish desires? And had we all become so disengaged that we were willing to allow a secretive consortium of scientists and distant government officials to decide the fate of the world for us? Had we as a species *given up hope* – just like the society described in the novel? Had we? But these questions appeared all too heavy for Rick, Rachel and Liz. They couldn't bring

themselves to follow these thoughts to their logical end. They just wanted to sip wine, have a light, brisk chat about the book, get caught up with each other and then return to their own solitary lives. What was wrong with that?



Afterwards, I faced the drive home. The city seemed darker, more ominous, as I passed through the core of its concrete thoroughfares. I arrived back at our high-rise condo building and parked with jittery precision in our assigned space in the underground lot. Then I rode our elevator, a sleek and silent room of mirrors, up to our ninth-floor unit. Unlocking the door with my Google Watch, I stepped inside our huge, spacious domain. To the left of our front entry was our master bedroom, spare bedroom, bathroom. To the right, our den and the alcove for our washer-dryer. In front of me, our sunken living room, and beyond it, our large kitchen next to our dining area overlooking glass doors leading to our balcony, which in turn overlooked the dull, grim skyline of our city and the lake beyond it, now hidden by the night.

Morgana was sitting on the couch in the living room watching TV, her face in profile to me. The jumping light from the screen cast silvery shimmers across her dark, kinky hair. She had a hand cupped to her mouth.

“I *did* it,” I said with exuberance. “I drove the car! Things got a bit dicey at a four-way flash at Dufferin, but I perserv—”

She turned to me then, and I could see that her eyes were full of horror.

“Morgana, what is it?”

She extended her hand in a gesture that said, *Come sit next to me*. Which I did. We turned and faced the TV together.

She was watching CNN. Above the frantic scroll of the news channel’s chyrons, we could see images of what was clearly New York City, its ragged bank of skyscrapers looming large, the sky above them huge and high. On the left side of the screen, the

Statue of Liberty made its perpetual, torch-clutching salute to the world. The ships in the harbour beyond it seemed to have stopped still.

Something wasn't right. I stared at Manhattan's dark sky as the news cameras flicked from angle to angle and couldn't quite grasp what I was seeing.

"There was an accident," Morgana said. "At least they *think* it was an accident. No one's quite sure. Oh God, Hector, it's just . . . it's just *terrible*."

What the hell was I looking at? It was not quite a mist, not quite a blob, not quite a funnel cloud. It was some combination of the three, spiralling upward from the city and into the vast ozone above it. The thing, whatever it was, was the ghastliest, most unnatural shade of green – a neon green, a Mountain Dew green. It rose radioactively from a point that couldn't have been more than a couple of city blocks and stretched up like a giant Y over lower Manhattan and into the heavens.

"What the . . . ?" I gasped.

"They say it's going right into the atmosphere," she told me. "It could cover the whole Earth in just a few –"

"Shh-shh," I said. "Listen."

The camera had switched to street level, and the journalists there were speaking in manic tones. The view panned upward. Tiny, dark shapes, barely perceptible, began plummeting out of trees and off buildings. As they did, they seemed to grow, to swell, to take on a new and foreign shape. What were they? Pigeons? Crows? Sparrows? Yes . . . yes – all of the above. Only, by the time they hit ground, they were something else entirely. Their feathers retracted into their skin, and that skin turned a shade of beige or brown or red. Wings became arms, and arms sprouted hands. The camera lingered over a pigeon's face, there on the sidewalk, and it was – it was *horrific* what was happening to its eyes and beak as that face contorted and ballooned.

"What the . . ." I said. "What the . . . *hell* am I even looking at?"

“Oh my gosh,” Morgana exclaimed.

The camera swished. A squirrel had climbed down from a streetside tree and ran up to where the pigeon writhed on the sidewalk as if to offer it help or comfort. Only, something was happening to the squirrel as well. Like the pigeon, it was doubling in size every few seconds, and its fur withdrew back into its skin, as if someone had filmed a blooming flower and then played it in reverse. Within another second – a *second* – the squirrel had . . . it had . . . sprouted *human ears*.

“Pullulation,” one of the TV commentators in the CNN studio was saying. “Obviously, this is not how the consortium wanted today’s experiment to go.”

“That’s right, Phil,” concurred a journalist on the ground. “The scientists had warned it was too dangerous to bring those canisters into New York, and to do it by rail no less. But the financiers insisted. They wanted to put on a show for people tomorrow, but boy howdy are they getting one tonight. Nobody could have *imagined* that a train derailment could cause –”

“Phil? Sarah? Sorry to cut you off. Sorry. Can you hear me? Yeah, yeah. Listen. We’re getting reports now out of multiple cities in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York State. Okay? Okay. Hang on. Yeah, and satellite images are showing that this . . . this *thing* has moved as far north as Ontario and as far south as Georgia. We have someone at the State Department who . . . hang on . . . they’re saying now that the entire globe could be – I don’t know the proper term, Phil. Infected? The entire globe could be infected with pullulation by as early as . . .”

Morgana and I looked at each other.

“This is going to change everything,” she said.

“Oh *man*,” I replied, feeling dread roil through me like thunder.

CHAPTER 2

Still, you couldn't allow something like this to spoil your plans. That was Morgana's attitude. Not that anything like *this* had ever happened before – the TV and newspapers and Internet now provided 24-7 coverage of a phenomenon that seemed straight out of the science fiction novels I'd held such a distaste for – but my wife insisted we continue living our lives. For example: Alanna and Mitch, our rural friends, had invited us up north to their home in Hope Mountain for brunch on a Saturday not long after the New York accident, and, goddamnit, Morgana said, we were going. I tried to talk her out of it. Until we could get a handle on exactly what this pullulation thing entailed, I was happier to just stick close to home. But my wife would have none of it. We nearly had a fight, and I was once again reminded of how obsessive she could be when it came to her social network – and not the online stuff either, the parade of comments from near strangers that showed up in our Whackr and JooJoo feeds. At a time like this, we need to be around friends, she argued. We are *going* to Hope Mountain.

So I did the driving, determined to quash the last of my vehicular anxieties. Getting out of the city was, despite the government vehicles and army checkpoints stationed every few blocks, a relatively easy endeavour. We hit Highway 407 in good time and

were soon sailing up beyond our city's outer suburbs. Morgana managed to find a radio station that was playing music rather than news reports, and the FM dial's Top 40 blandness soothed my edgy self as I clutched the wheel at ten and two and kept my eyes straight ahead. Once up on the empty road, we began to speculate as to why Alanna might have invited us to this lunch. There seemed a hint of, well, *ulteriority* to the email she had sent. Was there something wrong? Had she gotten ill? Did Mitch lose his job again and they were looking to borrow money from us?

Morgana, Alanna and I had met fifteen years ago in teachers' college. As professional training went, it was not as bizarre a choice as one might think: society considered it perfectly natural, and far less morbid, to want to educate children rather than bear and raise them. I think the reason the three of us grew so close in those days, and stayed so close, was because we all arrived at teachers' college at similar points in our lives: we were in our early twenties, with freshly acquired undergraduate degrees and huge ambitions for ourselves – none of which worked out. Me, I had wanted nothing more than to become a high school teacher after finishing my B.A. in political science.

Unsurprisingly, I didn't make the cut for even the supply-teacher list and drifted into a career in HR instead. Morgana, meanwhile, had done her undergrad in classics, but treated the acquisition of her B.Ed. as a mere backup plan until she could launch the *real* career she wanted – one in musical theatre. Indeed, this aspiration played a big role in why I was attracted to her in the first place: I had done quite a bit of acting as a child, and I found Morgana's passion for the stage deeply alluring. The theatre thing didn't pan out either, but she did – unlike nearly everyone else in our cohort – land a scarce full-time teaching gig, and had proven herself a delightfully adept elementary school music instructor.

Meanwhile, Alanna, after doing a commerce degree, decided that the business world was not for her and thought she'd try

education instead. But once she had come to befriend and trust Morgana and me, she revealed her true and slightly uncouth desire. Yes, Alanna was the rarest of rare souls: what she *really* wanted was to move home to Hope Mountain immediately after graduation and make lots and lots of babies with her then boyfriend, soon-to-be husband, Mitch (whom she'd been dating seemingly since elementary school), and become a full-time mom. This did not work out either. Due to unmentioned issues with her womanly plumbing, Alanna managed to have just one child with Mitch, their son Isaac, who was now ten, and they'd struggled to get pregnant a second time ever since.

It was probably just as well: Mitch worked as a welder and suffered from long stretches of unemployment, and they were always strapped for cash. He had done time in the oil fields out west, like so many men in the rural communities that surrounded our city, but he just couldn't hack the three-months-on-one-month-off commute. So, much to her irritation, Alanna had to take a job in Hope Mountain's local post office after Isaac started school. Her days were long and dull, the tasks monotonous. We often said to them, *Look, you guys really should move into town. Seriously. There aren't that many opportunities, but certainly more than what you'll find out in the sticks.* But this would not fly. Alanna and Mitch were rural folk, through and through. Mitch drove a pickup truck, not unlike the one that rear-ended me back in January. Alanna dragged him and Isaac to church every Sunday. Despite their relative poverty, their bungalow sat on nearly two acres of land, which Mitch had inherited from his parents. He kept hunting beagles in that large backyard – yapping, snapping beasts in eight-foot cages.

So there we were, beating it along at a good clip. Highway 407 became Highway 17, and Highway 17 became Concession Road 10. Up here, the houses were few and far between, the vast farm fields making their decades-old claim across the land. With no traffic for miles around, I felt myself relax behind the

wheel, my shoulders easing up, my left hand slipping down to six o'clock while my right fell away entirely. Morgana rested her head against my side and propped her feet on the dash, as she often did on long car rides.

Ahead of us, where the road tipped into a brief valley, I could see someone walking along the shoulder toward us. No, not *someone* – a group of people, marching in twos and threes along the edge of the asphalt. There were no sidewalks out here on Concession Road 10, and I grew uneasy at the idea that some of these individuals might wander thoughtlessly into our path. I slowed the Camry.

Morgana sat up. “Oh wow,” she said. “Just, just veer a bit to the left, Hector. Give them a wide berth.”

I did what she said. And then we noticed two things simultaneously: one, that there were even more people on the other side of the road, walking in the same direction as those on the right – that is, back toward the city whence we came; and two, that they were all, every last one of them, stark naked.

It was them – *them!* The progenies of pullulation. For the first time, we were seeing them in the, well, *flesh*.

Now Morgana really sat up in her seat. “Oh my *gosh*,” she said, cupping a hand over her mouth and blushing. Her big eyes gawked and her neck twisted around. I too took a brief gander as we passed this human caravan. A medley of body parts raced across my view. I glimpsed a set of vacant but determined eyes, a bouncing breast, pronounced brows, a swing of shoulder, a big, swaying dick.

“Watch the *road*,” Morgana chided me with a frantic whacking at my arm. “And slow down, would you. You’re going to hit somebody.”

So I faced straight ahead to concentrate on my driving while she watched the lumbering masses go by. Their numbers were soon thinning out, but then I spotted something in my peripheral vision on the other side of the highway. A group of four or five people were

on their hands and knees and appeared to be grappling with each other there in the deep ditch. No, not grappling. They were . . . they were . . .

“Holy shit, Hector – those people are *fucking*.”

“Morgana, sit down!”

Her face was flush, excited, as she settled back into the confines of her seat belt. My eyes peered ahead, my lips pressed tight.

“Wow,” she said slowly. “The news reports didn’t warn us about *that*.”



We pulled into Alanna and Mitch’s driveway to find Mitch sitting on their cement stoop in a plastic chair with a twenty-two rifle laid across his thighs. As I killed the Camry’s engine and we climbed out, he rose to his feet and greeted us with, “I’m gonna seriously fuck up any of them there guys that come here. I am seriously gonna fuck them up.”

“Mitch, put the gun away,” we heard Alanna call through the front door screen as we approached. “For Pete’s sake, would you just calm down.”

He stood the twenty-two up in the stoop’s corner and shook my hand as we climbed the blunt concrete steps. Below his Pittsburgh Penguins baseball cap, I could see Mitch’s eyes were manic and twitchy and teeming with fear, with the need to hurt someone or something. They were eyes that could not be reasoned with.

“We brought cantaloupe!” Morgana exclaimed. Through the screen door, she could see Alanna moving dishes from her kitchen counter to their small table in their small dining room. “Oh, sweetie, let me help you,” she said, and pushed her way into the house, the screen door squealing on its spring.

I gave Mitch’s shoulder a manly slap. “Everything’s going to be okay,” I told him. But he flinched, seizing up like someone who didn’t want to be touched.

Soon we were eating brunch – passing plates of bacon and pancakes, a cast-iron skillet of hash browns and our bowl of cantaloupe. Isaac had joined us, sidling into the seat next to his mother. Whenever she got up to fetch us more food or coffee from the kitchen, Alanna would tousle the boy’s hair or tell him to tell us about some vaguely interesting thing that had happened at school. Beyond the dining area, in their living room, a large flat-screen TV hanging on the wall blared Fox News bombastically even though nobody was watching it. The drone of reports coming in from New York and Mumbai, from Paris and Cape Town, from Seoul and Mexico City, was like the hum of white noise behind our conversation. Another racket soon joined the bluster, sailing in through the open dining room window that faced the backyard: the sound of Mitch’s hunting beagles, barking and yipping and snarling inside their cages.

“What I want to know,” Alanna said when our talk shifted, as it inevitably would, to the topic of pullulation, “is what are they all eating? I mean, there’s thousands of them, right? And they all have to eat. What are they *eating*?”

“Well, you should see the centres they’ve set up for them in the city,” I told her. “Banquet halls, hotel conference rooms, school gyms – the government has commandeered everything. And it’s not just food they’re giving out. It’s clothing, too, and sleeping bags. There’s even talk of giving them books.”

“*Books*?” Mitch made a face. “But how can they –”

“Well,” Morgana said with a flourish, “I heard from a colleague at school that you can teach one of them to read in about twenty minutes. It’s amazing.”

“But how do they know to go to the cities?” Alanna asked. “I mean, that’s one thing the news won’t say. How are they drawn to cities in the first place?”

“Well, it looks like it’s instinctual,” I replied, “at least for the ones who used to be birds. They’re no strangers to mass

migration, I suppose. The rest – the gophers and foxes and bears – just follow the pack.”

“The cities won’t be able to contain them for long,” Morgana said, salting her hash browns. “If their numbers keep growing, they’ll have to expand the city out to the suburbs and beyond to accommodate them. You guys might even lose your country life out here.”

“The *fuck* with that,” Mitch said, steering a triangle of pancake into his mouth.

“Mitch, the *language*,” Alanna chided, and made to cover Isaac’s little ears.

“May I be excused?” the boy asked, squirming away from his mother’s grasp. “I wanna go play army men on the deck.”

“That’s fine,” Alanna said. “But if you get hungry, just come back in and grab some more, okay?”

Meanwhile, Mitch’s beagles, through the open window, barked on.

After Alanna poured us all more orange juice, she took Mitch’s reluctant hand atop the table and gave it an assured squeeze. “So I have to admit – we had a bit of an underhanded motive for inviting you guys out here.”

Morgana and I flipped a brief, suppressed smile at each other, a look I was sure our hosts didn’t catch. *Told you*, my eyes said to her. *You called it*, her eyes said back to me.

“So, we’re pregnant again,” Alanna announced, right there as we ate. My fork paused, hovered briefly at my mouth, and I looked over to see the valves of Morgana’s throat do a spastic little dance before turning back to Alanna. *Whoa now*, I thought. *Come on. Surely it’s still bad form to bring up procreation while people ate? It’s like toilet talk.* Not according to Alanna. In that moment, she could have stood in for the woman in that poster I saw in the waiting lounge at St. Pat’s.

"Hey, wow," I replied, trying to smile through my revulsion.

"Oh *sweetie*," Morgana sang, and rose her rump off her seat to give Alanna a hug across the table. I offered Mitch my hand to shake, which he took even as he cast his eyes down.

"This has been a long time coming," Alanna went on. "You both know . . . I mean, I think we told you . . . that, well, I've had three miscarriages since Isaac was born . . ."

"Yeah, we knew that," I said.

"Anyway, so . . ." She shrugged, smiled and turned her palms to the ceiling. "It looks like this one took."

"Oh, Alanna, congratulations," I stammered. "You guys, you guys must be just *tickled*."

"Yep," Mitch replied. He seemed about to say more but then a raft of snarling and yowling from the dogs cut him off.

"Anyway," Alanna went on, raising her voice above them, "so we did want to ask you. And seriously . . ."

"Feel free to say no," Mitch piped up.

"Yes, feel free to say no. We'd totally understand. But. Well." They looked at each other, then back at us. "Are you interested in being little fetus's godparents?"

A bolt of lightning moved up my spine. Morgana and I exchanged another glance, one I hoped was as inscrutable as the last – a flicker of surprise, of doubt, of *Well, we'd need to talk about this*.

Alanna, no slouch in the empathy department, caught it immediately. "You don't have to answer right away," she said in a hurry. "You'd need time to discuss it . . . between yourselves. It's a big decision."

"A *huge* decision," Mitch concurred.

"But we just think . . . God forbid anything happened to us, you guys would make excellent guardians for little baby."

What on Earth gave you that impression? I wanted to say but maintained a neutral veneer. I conjured then the first and only exchange Morgana and I ever had about this sort of thing, back

when we were a year, maybe fifteen months into our relationship. *Look, this probably goes without saying*, she said one evening while we were out for a stroll, *but I'm really against having kids*. Her words were tinged with awkwardness and hesitancy, since, even then, she had no idea if I was one of these weirdos, these whack jobs, who actually wanted to procreate. *That's so great to hear – me too!* I replied with sincerity, and I could tell Morgana was relieved. There lingered, however, an uneasiness between us, an uncertainty about the future of this relationship that had, up until then, been going very well, very smoothly. So I followed up with a quick, *But I'm still going to marry the ass off you. You know that, right?* And she laughed, loud and generously, before taking my hand and pressing herself to my side, a gesture that said, *Yep, you're the one*.

I licked my lips and looked at Alanna and Mitch. “Wow, guys, this is . . . umm . . .” *What? A huge imposition? The most ridiculous request asked of us by anyone who wasn't family?* The dogs' barking through the window had taken on an almost incantatory quality, and I raised my voice to speak above them. “. . . very flattering. We're just . . .” and I looked at Morgana. “. . . just so touched . . .”

“Yes, touched that you'd even ask,” Morgana finished. The barking grew throaty, guttural, as if one of the beasts were choking to death. “But we'd have to think about this, right? I mean, we're total city slickers. If, God forbid, something *did* happen to you both, would you really want your kid growing up downt–”

“Dad! Dad!” Isaac was yelling from the deck's screen door. “Come quick!”

Mitch rose off his seat and flew to the window overlooking the backyard. As he pulled back the frilly curtain that hung there, his voice lowered to a deep timbre, almost tuba-like. “What . . . the . . . *fuck*.”

He darted to the front door. We heard it peel open on its spring and then, a second later, slam shut. He came racing through the house with the twenty-two and toward the back deck.

“*Mitch?*” Alanna got up and went to the window. Looking out,

her face suddenly crumbled, filling with a slack, baggy horror. Then she too bolted and followed her husband toward the yard.

Morgana and I got up and raced after them. The May sun was bright in our eyes as we hurried out onto the deck and descended to the grass. Ahead of us, we could see that Mitch had the gun raised and pointed at the beagles' cages. Isaac had tried to run to him, but Alanna now clutched the boy around the shoulders and held him tight against her.

There, in one of the enclosures, among the kibble bowls and water dishes and polyps of dog turd, sat a man. Naked and huge, he was huddled in one corner while the dogs in the cage barked and snapped at him. From where we stood, I could see the man's face. It was broad and fleshy, his brow a big bulging protuberance over his eyes. When he snarled back at the dogs, he revealed massive gums, monstrously wide inside his mouth.

"Get the fuck out!" Mitch screamed, the rifle's butt tight against his shoulder. "Get out now!"

The man scurried crabwise along the cage and toward the door as Mitch approached. One of his large, meaty feet sprung outward then and kicked the door open, shattering its bolt lock and knocking Mitch to the ground. We watched as the man sprung from the cage and zoomed around it in fear. He darted off to a copse of trees on the edge of the property. Before Mitch could even get to his feet, point the rifle and squeeze off a shot, the guy had vanished into the forest beyond.

We all stood there in the sun, panting in terror. Above us, a small string of cloud blemished the sky, its underbelly sporting a strange filament of green.

"Wait," Mitch said, looking the cages over and over. "I'm missing a dog. Where's Sammy? I'm missing Sammy."

Alanna, forever cursed with that queer and unknowable nature of hers, those maternal instincts, came up behind him and

placed a gentle hand in the centre of his back. Yes, indeed. She was a mother, through and through – even to her husband. And she knew then what we knew, what Mitch was being a bit slow in realizing.

“Honey, dear,” Alanna said, her voice quavering.

“Sweetie, I think . . . I think that *was* Sammy.”

CHAPTER 3

A nickname has emerged for these new members of the human race: blomers. The pundits had whittled down this sobriquet over several weeks from two previous and unworkable options. Someone had suggested they be called *boomers*, since their appearance in the wake of the New York accident had been like a bomb going off in the world's population. But then another pundit pointed out that there had been a whole generation of people, from years ago, called *boomers*, and so we all eschewed the term to avoid confusion. Then it was suggested they be labelled *bloomers*, since their presence seemed to bloom through society with such potent abruptness. But then the British kicked up a stink because, of course, over there *bloomers* meant something else entirely. So a compromise was struck, and the word *blomer* eased its way into our vernacular in no time at all.

What was to be done with blomers? They came staggering out of barns and forests and national parks, looking bleary-eyed and lost, as if they had just awoken from a centuries-old sleep. They lined our roads and highways, causing traffic to snarl on exit ramps and turnpikes. They flowed into the cities and clogged the streets. All over the world, government officials ushered them into countless help centres, providing food and clothing

and medical aid. Psychologists and linguists and educators were summoned. They learned that blomers were capable of language acquisition almost instantly and (as Morgana had heard through the teacher grapevine) could learn to read in about twenty minutes. What other aptitudes did they possess? If the government officials knew, they weren't saying yet. And as for the blomers' penchant for group sex? Well . . . the hope was that societal norms would kick in eventually.

Lord knows I certainly got an eyeful on my walks to work. I typically varied my commute – sometimes cutting along Carlton Park, sometimes strolling through the gay village, sometimes swinging through ritzy Isabella with its sprawling, turret-peaked homes. But now, it was as if each of these routes were hosting a raucous block party, every single day, all the time. The sidewalks teemed with lineups of nude or semi-nude blomers looking to get served at a help centre. Police and volunteers would move through the crowds, handing out donated food and bottles of water from large plastic tubs. Fights would sometimes break out. The less gracious people who lived along these streets would scream from windows for quiet. At one point, a blomer dressed in a mélange of borrowed and ill-fitting denim touched me on the forearm as I passed. “Excuse, excuse me, sir, can you, can you, can you help?” And I said, “Um, sure, I can try.” And she said, “I want to go to, um, ug ug ton?” And I replied, “Ug ug ton? Oh, do you mean *Ossington*? Ossington Station?” And she replied, “Yes, Ossington Station. That’s it. If you could tell me how to get there, I would greatly appreciate it.” And as I explained how to reach Line 2 of the subway from where we stood, I was blown away by how the sparrow had perfected her grammar and vocabulary in that one brief interaction, right before my eyes.

As for the blomers' public acts of sex? Well! I could hardly describe what I saw, the sidewalk threesomes and foursomes and moresomes. I thought: *I can't fucking take this. It's like the end of the world – only with orgies!* And I wasn't the only one bothered,

either. People would pause and look on in revulsion or shock as the blomers twisted themselves into the most elaborate, most creative sexual positions I'd ever seen. Some people, possibly Christian or Christianesque – religious types anyway – would step forward and make a half-hearted attempt to break these congresses up, only to be shooed away with slaps or shoves or barking. Others just stood there, as I did, with their mouths hanging open. One guy, a total stranger, nudged me with his elbow as he passed me by. “May see if the wife’s into *that* when I get home tonight,” he said, and nodded at the extravagant contortion happening not five feet from where I stood. No, we were powerless to stop these open-air debauches, these streetside gangbangs. It felt like something fundamental was changing. It felt like the end of the world. We had all just assumed that Armageddon would mean a massive *reduction* in the world’s population due to a superbug or environmental disaster, like something out of a Stephen King or J.G. Ballard novel. (James’s *The Children of Men*, I had to confess, had whetted my appetite for these kinds of stories.) But the opposite proved true. There was something about the overnight doubling, or tripling, or quadrupling – no government official would say for sure – of the world’s population that carried a distinct air of apocalypse.



Morgana and I, despite these tumultuous times, had a more pressing problem.

“I still can’t believe they asked us,” she said with a shake of her head. It was a Saturday night, and we sat in a booth at Milestones, sipping Bellinis. It had been like a game of hopscotch across the sidewalk out front to get into this restaurant, due to a massive construction project next door. Somebody was throwing up a new condominium tower, seemingly overnight. “I mean, we’re not even family.”

“I know. But who has *family* anymore?” I shrugged, fiddling with the little plastic toy that came with my drink. “Neither of them has siblings or cousins. We’re all they’ve got.”

“I know, but still.”

“Look, it’s a token gesture,” I assured her. “I mean, what are the odds they’re both going to die at the same time? Being godparents mostly means giving . . .” And here, I released another shudder of distaste. “. . . the *kid* a gift on its birthday and at Christmas. It’s no big whoop.”

“So you want to tell them yes?”

I thought it over. Truth was, I felt a certain loyalty toward Alanna. She was a good friend. Our personalities had really clicked, from the earliest days of teachers’ college – to the point where I might have considered asking *her* out instead of Morgana before I learned she’d been dating Mitch since the earth was still cooling – and we’d maintained a platonic closeness ever since. She always looked out for me, and I discovered that this was her jam: she tended to mother everybody she cared about. Indeed, after graduation, when it became clear I wasn’t going to make even the supply-teacher list, it was Alanna who suggested I adapt my new skills to the, Lord love me, *exciting* world of human resource management. Which got me a job, at least. I felt like I owed her a lot.

“I think I do,” I said to Morgana.

I thought my wife might protest some more, but then she raised herself up and over the table to kiss me and smile, her frizzy halo of hair blocking out the lamplight above our heads. “Fine,” she sang as she sat back down. “But if those two are killed in a plane crash and fetus comes to live with us, *you’re* changing its diapers.”

“Deal,” I smiled back.



During those first two months after pullulation, my job at Percussive Insurance provided a much-needed sanctuary for my unease. With the outside world erupting in change, I longed to lose myself in all the white-collar regimens that had given my life shape for the last decade and a half. Every day I would come in and promptly close my office door against the gossip and chattering that ricocheted down halls; I would do a couple hours of busy-work, approving performance evaluations or reviewing copy for a new job ad going out; and then my best friend, Otis, a fraud investigator, and I would engage in our daily routine. We took turns stopping by the other person's office at ten thirty every morning with coffees we'd pick up from the Second Cup coffee shop in the lobby. He was a black-with-one-sugar guy; I was a single shot of milk. We always had this time blocked off in our Outlook calendars, and we never seemed to lose track of whose turn it was to buy the coffees. In these post-pullulation days, we usually got our snarking about the state of the world out of the way first. He'd say something like, "How was your walk in this morning?" and I would answer, "Oh, you know, medium scandalizing. How's the subway these days?" And he'd say, "Oh fuck, you don't even want to know. I mean, can you explain to me how someone who was living as a bear in the woods a month ago needs to ride the train now, let alone at rush hour? The one I saw today brought a cello on board. A fucking *cello*. It was in its case, but still." Eventually, we moved on to work matters. Otis loved his job. Fraud investigation, in these straightened economic times, was a truly genteel profession. Sure, more people were wont to commit fraud during a recession, but when they got caught – and Otis always caught them; he was extremely good at his work – they would confess right away and be very contrite in the hopes of cutting a deal. And he would treat them so reasonably, so kindly, these people who were trying to rip us off. He would sometimes even develop

a personal rapport with the ones who were in really bad straits. I admired that about him. I admired that he, like me, was very prim and proper, very into hierarchy and procedure. He tended to dress up a bit for work, even on casual Fridays, securing a well-cut vest and jacket over his string-bean physique. I liked, however, that he also kept a bit of length to his sandy blond locks, a tribute to his former life as an aspiring but failed rock musician. Yes, like me, like Morgana, like Alanna, Otis carried a thwarted ambition in his past, one that he had decided, in a very grown-up way a dozen years ago, to move beyond. Music had been everything to him once, and then one day, it wasn't.

As I said, I had come to look forward to, even long for, this ten thirty ritual of ours – to see Otis sauntering up the hallway toward my office at exactly the prescribed time, carrying the two coffees from Second Cup on their tray. For him and me, this mid-morning gabfest had a normalizing, stabilizing quality to it, a way of creating continuity from one day to the next, and to nurture this work-born friendship that had become so important to us both as we cascaded toward middle age. So imagine my dismay when, at ten twenty-seven this morning, I saw not Otis's skinny presence stepping out of that elevator down the hall, but rather the bulky, greasy-haired waddle of Brennan Prate instead. He stepped from the elevator and headed like a liner ship toward my door. Brennan was a supervisor in our IT department and had a propensity to drop by uninvited rather than book a proper meeting in Outlook whenever he wanted to talk to you. He always carried himself with an air of immediacy and aggression. In appearance, Brennan was the very cliché of a helpdesk drudge: sneakers that barely passed for business casual squeezed onto his wide feet; wrinkle-free khaki dress slacks from Dockers; lanyard with security badge that dangled, permanently it seemed, from around his neck; and a cheap golf shirt that cupped his cauldronous gut like a hammock.

He came into my office then, sat uninvited in one of the guest chairs in front of my desk and said, quite cryptically, "Pigeons."

"Pigeons?" I asked, perking with surprise. I must confess now that I don't like Brennan Prate, and here's why. Brennan is a shit disturber. He disturbs shit. You take a shit, and he disturbs it. We HR people don't like our shit disturbed. We like to take our shit in a solitude of impunity and then send it off to a watery oblivion with one rote and well-calibrated flush. But Brennan will not allow this. He will not allow a shit to go undisturbed. "Brennan, what are you gibbering about?" I asked.

"We need to hire ourselves some pigeons," he said. "Right? Am I right?" When I displayed no understanding one way or the other, he pressed on. "It's going to get intense, Hector. Believe you me. There are thousands – no, *millions* – of blomers now living in this city, or soon to be. Things may seem chaotic now, but you wait. The government is teaching these folks to read and write and do math and hold down jobs. They're going to build homes for them and cars for them and integrate them fully into society. It's already beginning, Hector. And so what are all these blomers going to need?"

My head bobbed with incomprehension.

"Insurance!" he barked, his jowls parting up like curtains around the word. Despite his astonishing girth, Brennan spoke with a high-pitched voice, like the sound a balloon made when you slowly let some air out. "*Insurance*, Hector. We are in a growth industry now, thanks to pullulation. *Every* industry is going to be a growth industry before long. You wait. The economy's going to take off like a rocket, and everyone is going to need what we're selling. And do you honestly think that two hundred staff are going to cut it when this new world order comes? Do you think these people," and he motioned to the world beyond my office, "most of whom sleepwalk through their jobs anyway, are going to handle the inevitable workload when it comes?"

Just then, Otis arrived at my door with the coffees. My eyes gave him a halting look, and he tossed me a smirk when he saw

who I was with. He sidestepped to the little waiting area to the left of where my admin assistant sat at her desk.

“Okay,” I said slowly, turning back to Brennan. “But why pigeons?”

“What, don’t you *read* anything? The scientists are already starting to figure out the different talents that blomers have. They all got aptitudes. The ones who used to be pigeons are supposed to be logistically minded. Like, *intensely* logistically minded. They would make excellent project managers. There was a whole feature on them in *Newsweek*. Didn’t you see it?”

“No, I must have missed that piece,” I told him.

“Now, I don’t mean to be a shit disturber,” he said with the tenor of a man right on the cusp of disturbing some shit. “And I certainly don’t want to tell you how to do your job. But you’re the HR manager, Hector. This is your bailiwick. Imagine a Percussive Insurance that won’t employ two hundred people by this time next year. It’ll employ two thousand people, or five thousand, or more. Think about it. We’ll need pigeons to come in, when they’re ready, to set up whole new systems, to implement whole new processes, to head up whole new departments. It’s going to be *crazypants*. But we have to get in on the ground level of this, before other companies figure out the same thing and scoop up all the pigeons.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Brennan,” I replied. “Nobody’s sure how any of this is going to play out. I think we should take a more cautious approach before we go hiring blomers willy-nilly. Don’t you agree?”

“No!” he snapped. “I don’t agree at all. What is it with this place and its ‘cautious approaches’? I swear to Christ, it’s like we work in a bloody museum. Why do I feel like the only one who shows any initiative or pushes the envelope around here?” That was one way of putting it. Brennan did possess a certain scheming, ladder-climbing demeanour. He saw himself as far more than just a workaday code monkey and always seemed to

have grander, more ascendant plans for his career. Me, I found his entrepreneurial gumption rather distasteful.

“Well, I’ll take it under advisement,” I told him. “We can do some exploratory research. Launch a needs assessment for the sales department. Get a sense of the employment landscape out there if we need more bodies.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he said, and rose with great effort back to his feet. The guest chair seemed to gasp with relief. “You take it under advisement. You do your needs assessment. But I’ll warn you now, Hector. The future is coming. The future is *here*. We’ll all have to show a lot more resourcefulness, and fast. The blomers, once they come online with the rest of society, will change the game. You mark my words.”

And with that, he left. But before he could reach the hallway, my admin called him over to help her with something on her computer. He made a face as she described the problem to him, and then he said, “Can I drive?” before clasping her mouse in his beefy mitt and leaning over her screen. I could hear him lording his IT knowledge over her in that way that only IT people can.

Otis, meanwhile, slinked into my office with that smirk still on his face, and I made the quack-quack-quacking gesture with my hand as he passed me my coffee.

“What was that all about?” he said, sitting down.

“Oh, you know – the future.”

It was funny, then, how Otis and I got on the same page almost immediately, deciding to talk loudly about something unrelated to work *or* pullulation so that Brennan, just outside my door, would hear. We chose as our subject a particularly inane, old-timey sitcom that was enjoying a real resurgence on TV – one set in a suburban American family where the dad’s an idiot and the mom’s a shrew.

By the time Brennan wrapped up with my admin, Otis and I had really worked ourselves into a lather. Brennan’s chubby face loomed just beyond my door and we turned to stare at him. He

made sure to toss us a big, dramatic roll of his eyes – he'd always found our work friendship highly inappropriate – and we in turn tossed him a synchronized wave that no doubt boiled his blood. We watched him sway himself back down the hall to the elevator and press the button. As he stepped inside and turned to face us once more, I gave him a theatrical wink, which only seemed to baffle him. In response, his lips pulled away from his teeth in a kind of sneer, and just as the elevator doors closed in front of his face, he mouthed a single, silent word at us: *pigeons*.



Summer came and Morgana was done teaching for the year. Her two months' vacation stretched out before her like a river of relief, as stress had been brewing at the school board in the wake of pullulation and had begun bleeding into the classroom. Teaching had always been a sweet gig for my wife, enrollments being what they were. With only eight to ten kids per class, she could grow close to each and every one of them, remembering their names for years to come, recalling which instruments they had played and which of the kids had loved music and which ones had really struggled with it. But now, ministries of education all over the world were raising difficult questions about how to go about the mass instruction of blomers. With great haste, Morgana's own school board had set up huge teaching farms throughout the city – old, abandoned warehouses converted into giant classrooms – and they hired any unemployed person with a university degree (there were lots of them) to come in and teach. Because blomers were such quick studies, they managed to move through the system fast, as if on a conveyor belt, but there were always more to take their place. Talk now involved mobilizing the entire teaching profession come September to deal with the overflow. Morgana and her colleagues were given the choice of working during their vacations in these farms, but she promptly turned it down. Come

next summer, she told me, it may not even be optional. Better to enjoy this year's summer break in case it might be her last.

On the first day of her vacation, I came home from work to find her bouncing off the walls. At first, I thought it was due to all the construction noise coming from the condo unit next to ours. The neighbours had begun what sounded like a rather complicated renovation, and the days (and even some evenings) had been full of drilling and banging and grinding and crashing. But no. It wasn't that. "I've got it!" Morgana said, skipping through the living room toward me and throwing herself into my arms as I set my briefcase down. "Oh Hector, I've got it!"

"Got what?" I asked with a smile, throwing my keys onto their little table by the door as Morgana dangled and swayed off my shoulders. Her kinky brown hair looked damp, and her long, creamy neck carried the faint scent of chlorine.

"What I want my main activity to be this summer," she replied. "Come see."

She led me by the wrist to the couch, where her computer rested open on the far cushion. We sat and she placed the machine on her lap to show me the website she'd been looking at.

Morgana, I learned, had fled all the noise coming from next door and spent a good portion of the day at the community centre near our condo building. A cheerful, brightly lit touchpoint for the mixed-income citizens of our neighbourhood, the centre was one of my wife's absolute favourite places. It contained an Olympic-sized swimming pool, a large library branch, a gymnasium and a lovely sculpture-strewn courtyard with picnic tables where you could eat your lunch on sunny days. Morgana had gone there to return some library books and browse around, then took a long, leisurely swim in the pool. As she was leaving the community centre, she passed the bulletin boards on the wall near the Ping-Pong tables and saw a large, garish flyer tacked to the cork. It featured a web address that offered more information.

She showed that website to me now. “I called the number. They’re auditioning for lots of parts, including music assistant. I think it would be ideal for me.”

“Oh, I agree,” I said, channelling some enthusiasm.

The web page read:

COMMUNITY THEATRE 647
NEEDS VOLUNTEERS FOR
HARPIES: THE MUSICAL!
COME BE A PART OF THIS
FRESH, RAUNCHY RETELLING
OF *LYSISTRATA*.

Raunchy? I thought. *Oh dear.*

“I spoke to the director,” Morgana said, “and do you know what she told me? She said this play won’t be so much a retelling of *Lysistrata* as an ‘inverse’ of the story. Which, as you know, would suit me right down to the ground.”

I did know this. As mentioned, Morgana had done her undergraduate degree in classics, and there was a time in her life when ancient Greek theatre had been the be-all and end-all of culture for her. Of the ancient Greek playwrights, the greatest of these, as far as she was concerned, was Aristophanes. And of his eleven surviving plays, the greatest of *these*, as far as she was concerned, was *Lysistrata*. A cheeky little number, it told the story of a group of women from the warring city states of Athens and Sparta who conspire together to withhold sex from their menfolk to get them to stop fighting and negotiate a peace. Morgana wrote her honours thesis on the play; and while she loved *Lysistrata* with all her heart, she did argue therein that a flaw marred the play’s core premise. All that pent-up aggravation and sexual energy, she claimed, would make the men want to fight with each other *more*, not less. Morgana’s thesis posited that Aristophanes should have taken the exact opposite approach with his play, turning it into a kind of proto-porn movie, where *Lysistrata* and the gals

overwhelm their men, sexually exhaust their men, to get them to stop fighting.

This, it turned out, was more or less the concept behind *Harpies: The Musical!* I tried not to blanch as my wife described it to me. The whole show was to be a series of orgies set to show tunes. *Good gravy*, I thought. *They may have to change the name from Harpies: The Musical! to Herpes: The Musical!*

"I couldn't believe the coincidence of it," Morgana informed me. "It's like this director is going to bring my thesis to life, right there on the stage."

"That's, uhh, great," I said. "So . . . you'll, um, *audition* . . . for the role of . . . ?"

"Music assistant," she restated. "Apparently, if I play my cards right, I might even get to do a bit of composing. Oh Hector, isn't that *grand*?"

"Well, I'm excited," I said, feeling a rinse of relief. "It sounds like a wonderful summer project for you." I took a moment, then, to linger on my own days in the theatre as a child actor. This sometimes happened to me, when Morgana announced she had managed to put together some musical or show at school, and I would feel the warmth of my own memories on the stage, long before I became a doyen of HR. "But . . . wait," I went on, and gestured to the words on her screen. "Doesn't *harpy* mean, like . . . a harridan? You know, a coarse and disagreeable woman?"

"Oh, they'll be coarse and disagreeable all right," she said. "These ladies are going to wield sex like a stick in this play. I suspect the director wants to take back the term *harpy* for women – you know, the way fat people have with *wide-o*."

"That's fascinating," I said. I was about to say more, but we were interrupted then by the most thunderous, most hellacious explosion from the other side of our front entry's wall. "Jesus Murphy!" I shouted as we both flinched on the couch. It sounded like a large monster had just vomited rubble into the hallway beyond our door. Morgana and I got up to investigate.

Out in the hall we saw that, sure enough, the floor was strewn with broken plaster, and a couple of sledgehammers, brandished by two burly construction dudes in hard hats, were retreating into a gigantic hole in the wall they had made not far from our neighbours' door.

That door opened then and our neighbours, Terry and his wife, Agnes, a retired couple who had lived in the building for more than forty years, came out to greet us.

"Oh, hey, folks," Terry said. "Sorry about all the noise."

"No problem," I lied. "You, you guys seem to be undergoing quite a renovation in there."

"Oh, it's more than a renovation," Agnes said. "Terry, should I tell them?"

They looked at each other conspiratorially. "I don't see the harm," he replied.

"Tell us what?" Morgana asked.

"Well, a man came by the other week," Agnes said, "a real estate guy. And do you know what he did? He offered us one-thirty-five for our spare bedroom. He's converting it into a bachelor unit."

"Really?" I said. My first thought was *how the hell did the condo board allow that?* My second thought was *nobody offered us one-thirty-five for our spare bedroom.*

"You've got to take advantage of these opportunities when they come," Terry said.

"Oh, I . . . I know," I replied distantly.

"So, when does the new person move in?" Morgana asked.

"People," Terry answered. "*People* moving in. He's hoping to fit five, maybe even six blomers in there."

A silence, a boggy simmering dread, dangled between us for a moment.

"Well," Morgana said, her word curling upward into a kind of cheekiness. "Sounds like the thumping and banging may become a permanent fixture."

And, by golly, didn't Agnes blush.



MARK SAMPSON is the author of five previous books: the novels *The Slip* (Dundurn Press, 2017), *Sad Peninsula* (Dundurn Press, 2014) and *Off Book* (Norwood Publishing, 2007); the short story collection *The Secrets Men Keep* (Now or Never Publishing, 2015); and the poetry collection *Weathervane* (Palimpsest Press, 2016). Mark has published many short stories and poems in literary journals across Canada, including in *The New Quarterly*, *The Antigonish Review*, *PRISM international*, *The Nashwaak Review*, *The Puritan*, *This magazine* and *FreeFall*. He is a frequent book reviewer for *Quill & Quire*, *Canadian Notes & Queries (CNQ)* and other publications. Born and raised on Prince Edward Island, he currently lives and writes in Toronto.

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