

It was on a damp, hapless afternoon on the first of September when Mr. Ovid Kingsley found himself sprawled across the black-and-white checkered linoleum of the apartment building's vestibule, kissing a floor that had not seen a wet mop for all of the twenty years he had lived there. The professor came to this vulnerable position in what felt like an instant: one moment he was upright and reasonably steady for an old man, the next, splayed and prone with three limbs sweeping futile arcs against the floor. The fourth limb—his left arm—crumpled rudely beneath his chest, amplifying the faint heart-ticking that assured him he was indeed still alive.

Had Ovid Kingsley been a marine biologist, he might have likened this flailing of his extremities to the march of a leatherback turtle across the beaches of the Galapagos Islands. Had he been a war veteran, he might have had flashbacks of being wounded in combat, too weak to crawl to safety. Ovid was neither. Instead, he was a scholar of fine arts, a profession which came with its own set of biases and associations. The old man's views were colored by romance and grandiosity, steeped in a healthy sense of self. Imagining how this unfortunate spill may have looked from a bird's eye view, the sweeping arc of his arm and legs brought to mind only one parallel—Da Vinci's Vitruvian Man—and he, Ovid Alfred Kingsley, in split second had become a three-quarter prostrate version of the masterpiece, made flesh.

Returning to his senses, Ovid remembered the soup. Oh, the soup! The realization pierced him with sorrow: his quart-sized paper carton of bliss was now crushed and leaking beneath his ribs. Turning his head to one side, Ovid pressed his cheek against the gritty floor and felt the cotton fibers of his dress shirt drawing in the liquid heat of chicken broth. It had been a good batch, too—thick with noodles and not too heavy on the onions. He had thought of virtually nothing else upon waking, eager for the turn of the calendar page and the accompanying promise

of pre-autumnal delights. For the duration of his forty-year teaching career, soup and the start of the academic school year had been inextricably bound. It was the only meal he could afford as a young TA and by the time he made tenure it had simply become an unshakable habit. Ovid was a man of many unshakable habits. He was a vigorous defender of automating one's daily routine as a way of freeing the mind for the rigor of intellectual pursuits. What he was less aware of, however, was how this need for structure and predictability had a way of beating back the anxiety that constantly nipped at his heels. Today, that routine was broken. The world was up-ended. The fall, the soup—not to mention the betrayal callously delivered by the hand of his own daughter that very morning—had now rendered the day a total loss. Had he been superstitious, Ovid might have thought unholy alliances in the astrological realm were being made against his favor.

“Mr. Kingsley?” echoed a voice from the landing above. “Mr. Kinglsey, are you all right?”

The harried slap of Ravi Prakash's descending footsteps told Ovid the boy wasn't about to wait for his answer. The professor exhaled and attempted to roll onto one side when his folded arm was seized by an unexpected pain that yawned from wrist to elbow. The surprise of it pinched a bubble of air through his vocal chords, producing a sound that was a rather uncanny imitation of a dog's squeak toy. Suddenly, a smashed carton of chicken soup was the least of his concerns.

“What happened? Did you trip?” Ravi, the landlord's seven-year-old son, jumped the last few steps and landed right next to Ovid's head. The boy's feet, he noticed, were blurry.

The old man absently touched the bridge of his nose. “I seem to have lost my glasses.”

“They're in the corner.”

“Could you retrieve them for me?”

Ravi hopped over to the corner on one foot, then hopped back on the other.

Ovid’s heart ticked faster. “Are they broken?”

“They look okay.” Ravi handed him the glasses. As Ovid put on his wire rims the gray legs of the boy’s trousers come into focus. The legs of the garment were much too long, the fabric pooling around his ankles.

“Tell your mother to hem those pants of yours. You’re going to trip all over yourself.” The irony of Ovid’s statement was lost on both the old man and the boy—one of the many commonalities shared between them.

“She’s busy taking care of the baby.” Ravi offered his hand, but Ovid was afraid to move.

“What happened?”

The professor had been trying to piece together the direct chain of events that laid him flat, but to no avail. Up one minute, down the next. A blank in between. Surely some unseen obstacle had been the cause. He was not in the habit of falling for no good reason. As for the indirect causes, there was plenty of blame to pass around: the shoddy workmanship of his discount loafers; the light rainfall that slicked the soles; his landlord’s poor maintenance of the vestibule floor. The most blame, however, could be laid at the feet of his treacherous daughter, Claudia, who had taken away his car keys after a slight vehicular mishap and threatened further sanctions should he do anything else she deemed unacceptable. This looming threat had been on his mind from the moment she left.

Ravi bounced from the pad of one foot to the other, as though he was traversing a path strewn with hot coals. Ovid admire his agility, wistful for the days when his own body had been just as

fluid and cooperative. “I’m not exactly sure. I don’t remember tripping on anything.”

“Look at the mat,” the boy said, his slender arm pointing toward the door. “It’s wrinkled.”

Ovid didn’t bother to lift his head to look. “I have told your father on numerous occasions that mat was dangerous. It ought to be secured with a non-slip pad or perhaps some floor—” A stiff throb deep inside Ovid’s arm brought his rant to an abrupt halt.

Ravi crouched down, leaning close Ovid’s head. The boy’s big brown eyes and thick lashes hovered above him. Somehow it had escaped him until now that Ravi was losing some of the baby fat in his cheeks. He seemed to be transforming right before the professor’s eyes. Ovid drew in a frightened breath.

“Mr. Kingsley? Are you okay?”

“I’m not sure.”

Ravi grabbed the wrist of Ovid’s good arm and tugged. The old man protested. “Don’t—please—I just need a minute.” Ravi dropped his wrist. After one—two—three attempts to roll over onto his side, Ovid gave up. “Where is your father?”

“In the restaurant.”

“I’ll need you to fetch him for me...quickly,” he panted.

Ravi sprang into immediate action. “Don’t worry, Mr. Kingsley, I’ll be right back! I promise!” The boy ran outside and a moment later the professor heard the ding of the shopkeeper’s bell and the excited voice of Ravi Prakash penetrating the thin wall that separated the apartment vestibule and the restaurant, both of which his father owned.

In the few minutes it took for help to arrive, Ovid contemplated his fate. Until now, he had fared better than most. One by one, his friends and colleagues had been taken by death or illness

or nursing homes, all three of which he had dodged with surprising ease. A long life required flexibility, adaptation. Propulsion. Luck. For the last decade, Ovid had been both nimble and lucky enough to avoid most of the closing doors that one by one had trapped his peers. It wasn't until this past year that the doors had started closing for Ovid, too, spurred on by Claudia's need for control. As he surrendered his car keys, Ovid silently vowed he would never give his daughter a reason to take away the apartment and the life he so dearly loved. It was easy to be resolute when he could hardly allow himself to imagine any circumstance that would bring about such a turn of events.

Until now.

The fracture in Ovid Kingsley's arm sickened his heart; in an instant the last door had slammed shut. His freedom, he feared, was about to come to an end.