

Chapter 1

I saw the first one on a rainy night at the start of hot season. He lay next to me on the dirt floor of the movie-house, a warren of conjoined tarp-and-blanket tents that swelled in the rain and souged in the wind. Like me, he must have lined up too late to claim one of the bunkbeds, but he hadn't sprung for the rental of a thin and rank-smelling sleep pad. He did not speak to me, not during the ghost movie that was ending as I came in, not during whatever glamorous and dated trash came next, *Face of the Forbidden* or *Sorrow's Journeyman* or *Letter to a Woman at War*. But it wasn't the custom for sleepers who pitched up next to each other on the floor to make conversation, no more than those in the bunkbeds would have spoken to each other, men in stupor, exhausted men, making the sounds confined men make, except that on that night no one wept.

A seller of bootleg lottery tickets snuck in, worming his way beneath the hem of a blanket-wall. From across the room, he played his flashlight over the faces of his customers, and I took advantage of the light to look more closely at the man beside me. A line of dark liquid had seeped from the corner of his mouth to pool in the shell of his ear.

Do not touch him, I told myself.

He felt cold.

I knew better than to go looking for a beadle; sleepers who make trouble are beaten and thrown out into the night. Nor did it cross my mind to alert any of the others dozing in their bunkbeds, or to run out into the blanket-walled corridor and raise the alarm there. These men had

come to sleep through movie after movie, rocked to that shore by light and noise, not to make common cause with a stranger.

“Ticket?” the lottery man asked, startling me. He had worked his way around the room, crawling so as not to cast his shadow on the screen and rile the moviegoers, and he spoke now from somewhere near my elbow.

Flashlight propped in his mouth, he shone the beam down on the least convincing lottery ticket I had ever seen, a rain-damp scrap of lined notebook paper on which someone had drawn a stick figure. Beneath the stick-human’s crooked feet, jagged lines suggested a maw in the earth: the sinkhole, or “circlusion event.” Someone had written a string of letters and numbers along the bottom, random signs certain to correspond to nothing, least of all a prize.

“There’s no future in it,” I said.

“Sure there is. Yours.”

He proffered the ticket once more. In his prone and cramped position, he appeared to have no neck, nothing between his shoulders and the bullet-like dome of his bald, rain-spattered head. He gave every indication that he was willing to wait by my side all night.

I handed him a counterfeit dollar, an obvious fake, and he gave me the ticket and turned to leave.

“Wait, aren’t you gonna say the thing?” I wanted everything that was coming to me.

Instead of the traditional good-luck wish, this guy freestyled his own motto. “It would be better not to have been born,” he told me.

“Huh. I never was that lucky.”

“Him neither,” said the ticket seller. He jerked his head in the direction of the dead man, and then he crawled away, wriggling under the blanket hem.

Alone with the body again, I wanted to alert someone about it—discharge the burden, make it somebody else’s problem. But whose?

To walk right up to Wragge and tell him there was a dead man in his movie-house, that would never have occurred to me, though he would have been easy enough to find. I couldn’t hear his voice above the sound of so many movies playing all at once, but I knew he was out front, the toad, perched on his folding chair at the head of the long line of customers snaking up the from the canal-bank to reach the movie-house under the bridge. As landlord, Wragge did not have to do the lowly work of ticket taking, but he did it anyway. “They appreciate the personal touch,” he said of his nightly tenants. He appeared not to know, or care, that people felt soiled by contact with him.

Until midnight every night—curfew hour—Wragge sat at his flimsy desk, tearing printed tickets from a long roll.

“One human man?” he would ask each moviegoer in turn. “One dollar.”

Moviegoers seldom said anything in reply. Attestation of an unstained genome was mainly a formality up here under the Dawn Bridge, and Wragge never checked IDs. But dollars were another matter. Men offered up many things to Wragge as dollars or dollar-equivalents: teeth, stones, pennies; a wasp in a matchbox; a mallet without a handle; leather pouches full of stolen axle grease. He refused every one of these forgeries with one swipe of his meaty paw.

But to those who brought him a dollar, Wragge opened his hand. As the moviegoer passed into Wragge’s blanket-warren empire, he always gave the same blessing: “Cinema welcomes the sleeper.”

Me, I never blinked when Wragge asked about my humanity. Nobody knows whether it’s true that there has been “significant allelic drift toward the nonhuman” among those who work in the deadlands, but it certainly sounds like bullshit. Another way to control us, to keep us from

asking why only some shall rut and caper atop heaps of gold. But the “man” part of the equation, one human *man*, now there I was on shakier ground. At least in the eyes of those like Wragge.

If Wragge had really wanted to hear about it, which he didn't, he would probably want to know when I first knew I was a man, all that Jayden Copperfield kind of thing. I wouldn't have minded answering, though it was more of a range than a date, a protracted spasm of gnosis that gripped me between the ages of thirty-eight and forty-three—but all that was a long time ago now.

Someone like Wragge might think this was my comeuppance for having told the world that I was a man in the first place, but the truth is, although I had very much hoped to, I never really butched up, not all that much. Some people don't.

I am a man: as a declaration, it still has a certain weight, but only a shaky and provisional social traction, at least when I say it. If I had a home, I would keep to it nowadays.

In the suburban tent camps, no one checks IDs. Plus you can have a whole tent to yourself there—luxé pharaonic. But from one night to the next, the police might burn everything to the ground. You are left with nothing but a receipt for a “house”: a room in a subdivided shipping container, on a distant plain heaped with ash and slag. I stick to Wragge's, where I hope to be mistaken for exactly what I am, just one more aging, womanish man.

I looked over at the dead man again. In the movies, whenever someone watches a movie, dust-motes dance overhead in a projector beam, symbolizing the evanescence of all movie dreams. Here at Wragge's, a bluish glow lit the dead man's face. He lay still.

Do not fall asleep, I told myself.

In my dream, it was night and I lay on the floor of a room in the movie-house, dreaming. The lights were dim, the onscreen action obscure. In the way that one knows things in dreams, I

knew there was no sky above the tarp-and-blanket roof, only earth. The walls bulged, bellying inward. Water seeped beneath a hem and sluiced into the room, dirtying everything.