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MANIFEST DESTINY

Bernard is driving them north on the Pacific Coast Highway after an hour of gridlock on the 10.

“We could have walked there faster than this,” Chloe says.

“You couldn’t walk around the block in those murder weapons you call ‘shoes,’” he says, air-quoting with one hand, the other in a tight fist at the top of the steering wheel. He smiles, reaches over, and squeezes her thigh.

Bernard’s ex-wife calls. They argue about private school wait lists while Chloe looks out of the passenger-side window. His phone rings again, and he answers it—*Ciao, hey man, yeah now’s great.*

Chloe rests her elbow on the car door and presses her fingertips against the window. The glass is cool from the air conditioning blowing out of the vent on the dashboard. It’s not hot today; Bernard closed the windows because of exhaust on the freeway.

She tries to remember what month it is. The sky is a vague, milky blue. The air outside her apartment was the same temperature as her skin. They speed past villas perched on grassy hillsides, mansions the size of her fingernail. She thinks it must be May.

The GPS warns them of an upcoming turn. Bernard slows the car and tells whoever is on the phone that he’ll call back tomorrow. *Beautiful, man. Beautiful.* He signals onto a dirt road lined with scrub brush. Branches of wiry shrubs scratch against his car as it jackknifes along the face of the bluff. They drive under a stone archway dripping with hot pink bougainvillea and into a long, dark tunnel. “Cool, huh?” he says.

“Where are we?” Chloe says.

“Malibu.”

When they emerge from the tunnel they’re driving through a field of lavender in bloom. Chloe tries to open her window, but the child lock is on.

“Can you open the window?”

He does, and she leans over the lip of the door. She can smell the lavender and, underneath it, the faint coastal aroma of sagebrush and salt water.

Bernard pulls up to a folding table at the far edge of the field. He cuts the ignition. A young blonde woman sitting at the table

takes a sip from a green glass bottle of Perrier and screws the cap back on.

"I'm so glad you came," she says, kissing Bernard on both cheeks. She runs her finger down a list attached to a clipboard. "There you are. Plus one," she says. She gives Chloe a quick, tight-lipped smile and puts a mark next to his name.

"How *are* you, Amelia?" Bernard says.

Amelia tucks her hair behind her ear. "Oh, you know. Work hard, play hard," she says.

"Not working too hard, I hope," he says.

She rolls her eyes. "You know how Gustav is. But some friends rented out the Integratron for a sound bath this weekend, so I'm doing a little desert trip."

"Is it going to involve tripping in the desert?" he says.

"Oh my god! You're so bad," she says. She lowers her voice conspiratorially and adds, "That's between me and my dealer."

A black Escalade pulls into the grassy area where valets are parking cars and makes a U-turn. "There's your ride," Amelia says.

"Find me later, will you? Promise?" Bernard says.

"Promise."

Chloe can feel the heels of her stilettos sinking into the soft ground as they walk to the Escalade. "Who was that?" she says.

"Amelia? Just one of Gustav's gallerinas. She was working the front desk when I curated a show at his space last year. Sorry I didn't get a chance to introduce you."

"That's okay," she says.

A man in a bow tie opens the back door of the car and they climb inside. "The house isn't far," Bernard says as the man shuts the door behind them.

"Whose house is this again?"

"A collector. You wouldn't have heard of him."

A pair of tented softboxes on tripods and a step-and-repeat banner are set up in the foyer of the house. The photographer takes pictures of Bernard and Chloe, first together and then separately. Bernard turns the corners of his lips up slightly and tilts his head, like he's about to tell the camera something he swore not to reveal. Chloe knows she's not photogenic. She grins helplessly, the same strained expression that disappointed her each year when she opened the envelope from school picture day.

Bernard spells his name for the photographer's assistant, and she writes it down next to a list of numbers.

"Chloe Fitzkey," Chloe says. "F-I-T—"

"Got it," the assistant says. Chloe can see that there's only one word on the line after Bernard's name. She wonders if it's *delete*.

The living room looks like it was decorated by the installation crew of a natural history museum. Instead of books or family photos, the shelves lining the walls display a collection of crystals, each in its own tastefully dim spotlight. The furniture is carved from gnarled hunks of redwood, ponderous and gleaming with polish, except for two armchairs by the fireplace that have been constructed around the enormous curved horns of some unimaginable animal and upholstered with shaggy white pelts.

Gustav is standing next to a six-foot-tall monolith of rose quartz. He's holding a clear cocktail and talking to a man who is entirely bald except for a fringe of blonde ringlets. "Just the man I wanted to see," Gustav says as Bernard and Chloe weave toward him through the crowd.

"You know Jimmy," Gustav says to Bernard. "We were just talking about cleaning up his mess of a collection."

Bernard lets go of Chloe's hand and reaches out to shake Jimmy's, but instead Jimmy clasps his hand and holds it, pulling Bernard close. "I have a warehouse out in the valley that's *full* of shit. I have shit I've never even seen," he says.

Bernard had been wrong in the car; Chloe has heard of Jimmy Young. She's heard people talk about him at the parties that Bernard takes her to—openings, premiers, launches, dinners in honor of people and things, events celebrating other events, screenings, readings, garden parties, after-parties, and other miscellaneous parties that she doesn't totally understand, like the one she is at right now.

During the day Chloe works as a salesgirl at a gift shop. At five o'clock she closes the store, counts the drawer, and goes home to change before Bernard picks her up. No one at work knows about what she does when she isn't there.

Once Bernard came into the shop with a huge, showy bouquet of flowers. "I saw these and thought of you—I just had to have them," he said. Chloe had been flattered but embarrassed, putting them in a glass of water in the coatroom until it was time to leave.

People at parties often mistake Chloe for Bernard's last girlfriend, calling her the wrong name and warmly embracing her, and she doesn't correct them.

Chloe puts her hand on Bernard's shoulder, and he turns to her during a break in the conversation. "I'll be right back," she says.

"Sure. There are bathrooms all over the place. Jimmy, how many bathrooms do you have in here?" he says.

"You'd have to ask my wife," Jimmy says.

There are many ways to leave the living room. Chloe picks a door at random and goes through it. She finds herself in a long hallway with more doors on either side. Other than an occasional caterer carrying a fresh tray of champagne or canapés from the kitchen, she is alone.

She walks slowly down the hall, peeking into doorways as if she were looking for something. The first room has sleek bamboo floors and a back wall made of glass. The only objects in the room are a chair and a desk, both cast in clear Lucite. Through the furniture and the wall, Chloe can see a koi pond at the base of a weeping willow and two men in sports coats sharing a joint.

The next room is much larger. Floor-to-ceiling bookcases line the walls, and they actually contain books. Chloe goes inside and begins to browse the shelves, curious about the makeup of Jimmy Young's library. Most of the volumes are pristine, possibly even unopened, while others have spines so brittle that they look like they would crack in half if you tried to read them.

The library is organized by subject, with categories juxtaposed like guests at an eclectic dinner party—Eastern religion next to Hollywood biographies, mysticism next to Russian literature, French philosophy next to an exhaustive collection on Sir Edmund Hillary's ascent of Mount Everest. Chloe takes a paperback out from the philosophy section and flips to a page in the middle.

Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves. She walks over to a leather couch studded with brass rivets and sits down, crossing her legs. *What a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying . . .*

"There you are," Bernard says.

Chloe drops the book to her side and turns toward the door.

Bernard crosses the room and sits down next to her. "What are *you* doing reading Deleuze?" he asks playfully, taking the book out of her hand. "Why don't you go get yourself a drink? Mingle a little. Jimmy wants to show me his motorcycles, maybe take one for a spin."

"Can I come?" she says.

Bernard smiles. "I don't think you're dressed for it, babe. Motorcycles and miniskirts don't mix." He runs his fingers along the hem of her skirt and then lightly rubs her thigh. "I won't be gone long."

There's a line at the bar set up on the patio, but Chloe's glad to at least be outside. A man her father's age, dressed in leather Top-Siders, jeans, and a rumpled linen shirt, is waiting next to her. She sees him glancing at her and braces for the impending small talk.

"Come here often?" he says with a little smirk.

"I've actually never been here before," Chloe says.

"How do you know Jimmy?" he says. "Or are you connected to the gallery or whatever? An artist?"

"No, I'm not an artist," she says.

He looks around, takes a pair of sunglasses out of his shirt pocket, and slips them on. "So then what do you do?"

"I work in a gift shop."

"Do you like it at the gift shop?"

She pauses to think. "No," she says.

The man makes a half-laughing *hub* sound and cranes his neck to see how many people are ahead of them in line. Chloe crosses her arms and then uncrosses them.

"What do you do?" she says.

"Have you heard of *The Simpsons*?"

For a moment Chloe considers saying no, she has not heard of *The Simpsons*. "Yeah," she says.

"I was one of the first writers on that show. Worked there for a while, did some *Late Night*."

"Wow. Cool," she says.

They are now one person away from the bar.

"Who was the host when you were writing for *Late Night*?" she says.

"Letterman. The original. That was before your time, though," he says. His gaze travels down her dress, stopping mid-thigh. "Are you even old enough to be drinking?"

"I'm twenty-two."

He shakes his head. "God, to be your age again. Money can't buy it." He leans in close to her ear and sticks his thumb out in the direction of the people milling around the patio. "Although some of these gals sure do try, don't they?"

When they reach the front of the line Chloe orders the first drink on

the list of custom cocktails without reading the description. “Make that two,” she says, smiling into the crowd and raising her hand in a little wave, as if she had just recognized a friend.

With a coupe glass in each hand she leaves the patio to find the pond she had seen through the glass wall of the house. She walks through a Buddhist sculpture garden, passing a man engrossed in a cell phone conversation who is pacing between twisted Bonsai trees and a waiter collecting crumpled napkins and stray glasses that have been discarded beneath fragments of deities mounted on smooth marble plinths.

When Chloe arrives at the edge of the pond she sits on a stone bench to watch the koi make their languid rounds. The sun has almost set and she wonders where Bernard is, whether he’s taking her out for dinner after this. She finishes one drink and then the other as the fish rise and sink.

At first Chloe picks up her empty cocktail glasses to bring back to the house, but then she remembers Bernard saying she looked like a caterer when she carried dirty glasses around at a party. *And where are you bringing them, anyway? To wash out in the sink?* She puts the glasses back down on the bench, which is watched over by a serene stone Buddha’s head that’s been broken off at the neck and piked on a steel rod.

On her way back to the party Chloe is stopped in the sculpture garden by a waiter carrying a tray of champagne. He offers it to her, and she thanks him and picks a flute off his tray, sipping it as she walks. She exchanges her empty glass for a full one from another waiter a few minutes later.

Chloe’s ankles wobble in the straps of her heels as she clumsily parts her way through the crowd, stepping on toes and leaning on strange shoulders. In a room off the foyer she glimpses a long dining table set with some kind of food, but when she gets closer she sees that it’s just dozens of gourmet cupcakes arranged around glass vases of jelly beans and peppermint swirls and a silver filigreed platter of joints. She’s debating whether or not to eat one of the cupcakes when the man next to her says her name.

“Hey, Keller!” she says, grateful to recognize someone at the party.

They don’t hug because he’s holding a dinner plate piled with cupcakes. “Where’s Bernard?” he says.

“No idea. I barely even know where I am right now.”

Keller takes a joint from the tray and puts it behind his ear. “You want to go smoke?”

She hesitates slightly. “Sure,” she says.

Chloe first met Keller a few months ago when Bernard had brought

her to an opening at Gustav's gallery. The space was filled with Keller's installation art, which was made from dense collections of trash and ephemera that looked like the refuse caught in the currents of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, or the chaotic contents of a hoarder's storage locker. It had been almost stressful to look at for Chloe, who thought mostly about how someone would have to clean all of this up.

Keller grabs a few more joints and drops them into the front pocket of his T-shirt before turning to leave. Chloe follows close behind him, concentrating on her balance as he leads them outside and down a long gravel walkway. Two rows of floodlights illuminate the spherical cacti and smooth beaded succulents planted on either side of the path, like a landing strip leading to the swimming pool up ahead.

When they reach the tiled border of the pool Keller puts down his plate of cupcakes and takes off his sneakers. He sits with his feet dangling in the water while Chloe gingerly lowers herself next to him. She isn't sure she can figure out the several buckles holding her shoes together, so she sits with her legs bent beside her, leaning on one arm.

A waiter walking past the row of vacant chaises behind them stops and bends to offer them the last two flutes of champagne on his tray. Keller shrugs and takes one. "Sometimes you just want a fucking beer, you know what I mean?" he says to Chloe.

"Yeah," she says, taking the other flute.

Keller cups his hand around the joint, flicks the lighter, and inhales. He holds his breath and passes it to Chloe. She takes it and tries to inhale as little as possible. "What does Jimmy even do?" she says, handing the joint back.

"He made his money as a music producer," Keller says. He takes a long hit, tilting his head up to the night sky.

"Anything I would have heard of?" she says.

Keller exhales a prodigious cloud of smoke and turns to her, grinning. He starts singing a medley of one-hit wonders, mostly from the eighties, replacing lyrics with *da-da-da* when he can't remember the words.

Chloe laughs. "Okay, I get it," she says. Keller hands her the joint, and she takes another hit reflexively, forgetting not to inhale too deeply. "Fuck. I'm going to get so high," she says. She looks at Keller and starts laughing again, and then begins to cough.

"Easy, tiger," he says, reaching over and plucking the joint out of her fingers.

"It's too late for that," she says.

Chloe has a sudden, overwhelming urge to lie down on the concrete,

but instead she picks up her glass of champagne and takes a fortifying sip. Keller finishes the joint, stubs it out, and puts the roach in his pocket. Chloe feels like it's important to conclude the conversation they were having. She squints at the pool as she tries to remember what it was.

Keller picks a cupcake up from the plate next to him. He turns it around in his hand, inspecting it, and then peels back the paper wrapper and takes a bite. "You want one?" he says while chewing. He holds the plate out to her, and she chooses a cupcake with an entire strawberry perched at the tip of the pink piped frosting.

"Why did you get so many?" she says.

"I wanted to see what's inside."

Chloe picks the strawberry off her cupcake and takes a bite. It's one of those firm, juiceless strawberries that's more like the idea of a strawberry, red and heart-shaped but incapable of ripening to sweetness.

"So what was inside?" she says.

He pauses thoughtfully. "Some kind of peanut butter."

They look at each other and laugh. The air has become cool, and a light mist of steam hovers above the pool. Chloe dips two fingers into the water. "It's warm," she says.

"Salty, too. Taste it," he says. Chloe laughs again, but Keller is looking at her expectantly. She puts her fingers briefly in her mouth.

"Jimmy talked my ear off about this pool the last time I was here," Keller says. "He heats it to exactly 96.8°, with enough salt in it so you automatically float to the top. Don't have to move, don't have to think."

Chloe puts her uneaten cupcake down beside her. "Like you don't exist," she says.

Keller leans back on his hands. They sit in silence, watching a pair of searchlights arc faintly across the sky from the direction of Hollywood. "That sound good to you?" he says.

She looks at him, at his torso stretching the fabric of his T-shirt and his legs kicking slowly underwater, pale in the lights shining from the bottom of the pool.

"Actually, yes," she says.

"Want to try it?"

"Wait—now?" Chloe says, but Keller's already sitting up and pulling his T-shirt over his head.

"Yeah. Who cares?" he says.

Chloe turns toward the blur of light and laughter on the patio. Since the sun set, the party has become concentrated around the house; no

one seems to be nearby. Seeing the crowd from a distance makes her think about how similar all these parties are, how nothing ever seems to happen—just surfaces gliding against each other, frictionless and immutable. She has a hazy sense that things are this way for a reason, but she can't remember why.

“Okay,” she says.

Keller stands, unbuttons his shorts, and pushes them down. He isn't wearing underwear. He kicks his shorts to the side with one foot and then executes a perfect dive, slipping soundlessly under the surface and emerging halfway across the pool. “Come on in,” he says. “Water's fine.”

Chloe rises with some difficulty. She pulls her dress over her head and tosses it on a chaise. As she steps out of her thong it gets caught on a heel of her stilettos, and she teeters on one foot as she tries to untangle it. Keller is floating on his back with his eyes closed.

She bends to start undoing the tiny buckles of her shoes, but stops after the first one and stands back up. “Fuck it,” she says, leaping into the pool.

Chloe's levitating in corpse pose, suspended in the womb-warm liquid. Her head is tipped back, and her ears are underwater. She can hear her blood, her beating heart, the ambient hum of the water touching her body and billowing her hair out around her like a saint's aureole. She closes her eyes and breathes.

It's hard for her to tell how much time has passed when she feels the pool shifting around her. Most of her body is warm, but her nipples have become cold and hard in the night air. She thinks Keller must be getting out to dry off. She opens her eyes and then jerks into a protective crouch in the water.

Standing next to the pool are Jimmy, Bernard, Amelia, and a few other people Chloe doesn't recognize. Jimmy's laughing, and a woman who seems to be his wife is scowling and crouching carefully in a tight dress as she moves their champagne flutes away from the edge of the pool. “If these fall in we have to drain the whole thing,” she says to Chloe.

Chloe looks at Bernard. His face is redder than usual, and his jaw muscles are tightly clenched. “I would have brought my suit if I knew it was going to be a pool party,” he says.

“Doesn't seem like you need one,” says one of the men. He looks at her and winks. She pulls her knees to her chest more tightly and realizes

that she's still wearing her stilettos, one of which is partially unbuckled and trailing a thin leather strap.

The air in the car is cold and Chloe is shivering. Her skin is rough with goose bumps, and her nails are turning lavender. Bernard is in the passing lane on the 10, driving too fast—eighty miles an hour, then ninety.

“So, did you have fun with Keller tonight?”

Chloe looks out of her window at the silhouettes of palm trees sliding by in the darkness beyond the freeway. “It’s not like anyone even knows who I am. It’s fine,” she says.

“Oh, they know who you are now,” Bernard says. “Now you’re the girl in the pool. That’s all people will remember about you. You’re the girl in the pool at that party.”