

SOLIDITY

Greg Egan

Greg Egan's latest novel is *The Book of All Skies*, and his latest collection is *Instantiation*. Greg's latest tale looks at the difference resilience can make when challenged with tragedy and chaos.

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The air in the classroom was warm and still, the teacher's voice a lullaby, with stress falling on syllables like the patter of sparse, heavy raindrops on the roof tiles. Omar fought to keep his eyes open, reading the words on the blackboard backward to sharpen the soft sentences into dnim sih rof selzzup gnizzub.

That only worked for a while. He turned his gaze to the window, hoping that a jolt from the outside world would be bracing enough to spare him the embarrassment of his chin falling against his chest. Brooding clouds stretched out above the empty playing field; he let himself escape through the glass for a moment, imagining the wind ruffling his clothes as he flew toward the horizon.

He looked back at the blackboard. The bullet-pointed list of factors determining the sites where cities were most likely to be founded had been replaced by an enumeration of the criteria for determining when two triangles were similar. Omar felt himself smiling unwillingly, and his face growing hot with shame; he must have dozed off and—somehow—been left undisturbed as his geography class filed out of the room and this mathematics class filed in. It was not one of his own classes; he didn't recognize the teacher, or any of the students now sitting around him. After geography on Tuesdays, he had English. All he could do now was wait for the right moment to excuse himself and slink out.

The teacher paused and glanced over her shoulder, to check how her exposition was being received. Omar caught the startled expression on her face, before the confusion ignited into shock and panic. She turned fully to face the class—paying no special attention to him as she surveyed the whole room in disbelief. “Where . . . ?” she demanded, before abandoning the question, as if she was unable to settle on who or what would be the appropriate subject of the inquiry.

Omar looked down at his desk. The open notebook was exactly the same kind as the one he'd been using for geography, but it showed sketches of half a dozen triangles, with annotations that were not in his handwriting.

A girl slid her chair back, rose to her feet and ran from the room. Omar watched as three other students did the same; the teacher made no effort to stop them, or even ask for an explanation. Omar was tempted to follow them, but his curiosity now was stronger than his embarrassment; whatever was happening in this class, it was not confined to some lapse on his own part.

A boy raised his hand. “Excuse me. What happened to Ms. Tham?”

The teacher gazed back at him for a while, then replied, "I don't know who that is."

"She was teaching us French, before you . . ." The boy stopped and scanned the room, maybe hunting for someone who might back him up, but Omar was fairly sure, from the growing distress on his face, that he, too, recognized no one around him.

"I think it might be best if we stop here," the teacher declared. "You can go and get your books for your next class."

Omar heard rapid footfalls echoing down the corridor. A group of students ran past the doorway, very fast. If they'd been let out early and erupted into rowdy celebration, he would have expected to hear whoops of elation from them; instead they were as silent as if they were being pursued by a terrifying adversary. He waited, tensed, but nothing followed.

The teacher said, "Please. Just depart in an orderly manner."

Everyone stood up; however confused they were, it was clear that this substitute teacher was offering no answers, and was either as much a victim of the slickly staged prank as they were, or a prankster herself, sworn to deny all knowledge of the reality TV company that must have pulled the whole thing off. Omar left the notebook and pen on the desk, but picked up the backpack that hung from his chair. It was the same brand and color as his own, but he was afraid to look inside to check that it really belonged to him.

He waited for the crush near the doorway to thin. Out in the corridor, he could see other classrooms emptying; he watched the students filing out, regarding each other warily, mostly in silence. He didn't recognize anyone at all. It wasn't merely that he was yet to spot Bruno or Tuan, or any of his other friends or classmates; not one of the faces was familiar to him, in the way he normally knew most people in the school by sight even when he'd had no reason to learn their names.

He glanced back toward the room he'd just left. A woman he'd never seen before strode out, carrying a stack of papers. Omar walked over to the doorway and looked inside the empty classroom. The blackboard bore no discussion of triangles now, just "The Call of the Wild" written large at the top, and some thematic points spelled out below.

Omar felt his skin turn icy. Were there drugs that could do this that he might have unwittingly imbibed? Or was he succumbing to some form of mental illness? He stared at the mundane chalk marks, daring them to mutate into leering neon serpents, but they remained stubbornly non-psychedelic. He pulled his phone from his pocket to search for the symptoms of ergot poisoning, but the solar eclipse wallpaper wasn't his, and the phone rejected his PIN. That the date and time were exactly what he expected only seemed like an insult; if he could hallucinate entire classes in and out of existence, how hard could it be to make the display read twenty-nine o'clock on the fifty-fifth of May?

He joined the flow of students heading for the stairs. At first, he took his cue from the crowd and avoided eye contact, as if he was in hostile territory . . . but that didn't really make sense, when there was no one at all swaggering around like they owned the place.

As he reached the ground floor, Omar turned to a boy about his own age who was walking beside him and nodded to him amiably. "What's with this shit?" he asked.

The boy said, "Yeah?" He'd looked haunted before, but now he grinned and shook his head, as if they were just commiserating with each other over an especially tedious assembly.

"Is this the only high school you've been at?" Omar asked, glancing back to check that *this* still meant what he thought it did. The building they'd just left looked the same as it always had, at least from his current vantage.

"Yeah. I started here in Year Seven, last year."

"Me too. My home room teacher's Alderson."

The boy flinched a little, but reciprocated. "Mine's Millar."

“So . . . I never met anyone with your home room teacher before, and I guess you never met anyone with mine?”

“No.”

By now that was more or less what Omar would have predicted, but discussing the anomaly out loud still felt like he was gingerly probing a wound, working up the courage to learn exactly how deep it went.

They were halfway across the playing field now. Looking ahead, to the quiet suburban street that ran past the back of the school, Omar could see no traffic, but that wasn't unusual for this time of day.

“I'm Omar,” he said.

“I'm Tony.” They bumped forearms.

“Is your phone working?” Tony asked.

“It's not dead, but it's locked.” Omar fished it out and held it up; there was a cartoon wolf on the screen now. “What the hell is that?”

Tony peered at the wallpaper. “Looks like the mascot for a sports team.” That sounded plausible, but apparently he didn't know the name of the team any more than Omar did. “You could call emergency services.”

“Yeah.” Omar pondered this. “What would I tell them, though?”

They'd reached the street. There were still no cars around, and all the pedestrians looked like fellow students—if “fellow” was the word for it.

“I go this way,” Omar said, gesturing left.

Tony said nothing, but Omar caught a flicker of fear in his eyes, as if he was being asked to stop clinging to the piece of wreckage they'd been sharing and swim off for the shore alone.

“Usually,” Omar added. “But I wasn't expecting classes to finish this early. You want to hang out for a while?”

“Sure,” Tony replied.

They turned right.

Omar was encouraged to see that some of the other students walking ahead of them had gathered into small groups. Whatever was happening, sharing information seemed like a good start.

“Does this date look right to you?” Omar asked Tony, checking his phone to see that it hadn't changed, then holding it up again.

“Yeah.”

“Same here. So neither of us are time travelers.”

Tony snorted with amusement, but then the mirth on his face decayed into something darker. “I keep hoping I'll wake up, but I've never had a dream where everyone else wants to wake up, too.”

They were approaching the intersection with Gleason Street; Omar could hear the traffic, and see some vehicles passing by. “The cars haven't all stopped working,” he mused. “It's not like their batteries got replaced by fish tanks.”

“And your phone is still a phone, even if it isn't yours.” Tony spread his arms. “My clothes still fit, and they're almost what I put on this morning.”

“Almost?”

Tony reached into the side of his jeans and tugged a small portion of bright red fabric into view. “My boxers changed color. I don't even own a pair like that!”

At first glance, Gleason Street looked normal: there were no ten-car pile-ups, no abandoned vehicles parked at strange angles, no signs that any drivers had vanished from behind their steering wheels. But the pedestrians were radiating confusion and anxiety; some kept their eyes downcast, others swept their gaze around in all directions, as if they were seeking some person or landmark that might guide or comfort them.

"That used to be Gino's Convenience," Omar said, pointing to . . . a convenience store with slightly different signage. "You got any money?"

"Just a card." Tony produced his wallet and pulled out a plastic rectangle. "No, that's a library card."

"It might not have worked anyway." Omar checked his own wallet. He couldn't remember the last time he'd used cash, so he didn't really know what should have been inside, but he found a ten-dollar bill that looked perfectly normal to him.

He passed it to Tony. "Is that real money, in your world?"

"Sure."

"Then let's test it out."

They entered the store.

There were racks of bread, and bins of fruit and vegetables by the entrance. The names of the bakeries were all familiar, and the fruit didn't look strange or exotic. They strolled past shelves of breakfast cereal and tinned food; a few of the brands didn't ring any bells for Omar, but then, that was no different from walking into Aldi's.

"You want a drink or something?" he asked Tony.

"Yeah."

They approached the refrigerated cabinet. There was flavored milk from the usual dairies; he picked out a chocolate one for himself, and looked to Tony, who said, "I'll have the same."

The cashier was a bored-looking man in his twenties. "Eight dollars," he said, when Omar put the drinks on the counter.

"Are you sure?" Omar could have sworn the tag on the shelf had said \$3.20, though maybe that had been the price of a neighboring item. "Don't you want to scan them?"

"The scanner's on the fritz."

Omar handed over his ten dollars, and the man barely glanced at it before giving him change.

On the street, he opened his carton and took a long swig. Tony hesitated. "What if the food's different here? Like . . . mirror-image molecules, or different isotopes?"

"We can still breathe the air, can't we?" Omar replied. He didn't really know what fears were reasonable, but weird chemistry seemed like the least of their problems.

"Okay." Tony sampled the milk warily, then seemed to decide it was palatable.

"You want to check out your house?" Omar asked him.

Tony was quiet for a while. "I've got a key," he said. "But what if it doesn't fit?"

Omar shrugged. "Then I'll help you break in." There were far worse things that might have ceased to match than the lock and the key, and he suspected that the odds for all of them were more likely to grow worse over time than better.

They continued down the street, past shops and houses whose architecture all seemed familiar, whatever variations had been wrought at the level of paint and lettering. A few cars began speeding through the traffic, honking frantically as they weaved from lane to lane. Omar kept expecting to hear sirens closing in on the offenders, but the police were either dealing with more serious transgressions, or had gone off to tend to their own personal meltdowns.

"You got brothers and sisters?" he asked Tony.

"A little sister. She's ten. What about you?"

"Two older brothers."

"Still in high school?"

"No. One's working in Darwin, one's studying in America." Omar wondered if they might have been spared the disruption, even if he was now separated from them.

Separated by what, though? If the world had been torn apart, where were the fault

lines? “The roads all still join up,” he said. There were no sudden dead ends, no mismatched strips of asphalt like an earthquake might have produced. “And the buildings have barely changed.”

“I think it’s mostly people that are different,” Tony replied. “People, phones and underwear.”

“Maybe it will all snap back into place,” Omar joked.

Tony checked his boxers again. “Oh, come on! *Purple?*”

“What did you put on this morning?”

“Black.” He sounded a little offended by the thought that he might have willingly chosen anything else. “So have I swapped bodies with someone who wears purple underwear . . . or just swapped underwear with them?”

“I don’t feel like I’ve swapped bodies,” Omar said.

“I don’t either,” Tony admitted. “But swapping underwear would be gross.”

Omar tried to elevate the conversation. “Who was the Prime Minister, when you woke up this morning?”

“Tanya Plibersek.”

“Same here.” Omar floundered; did he really want to run through a list of heads of government, when neither of them could check their answers on the web? Winners of wars? Assassination attempts?

He settled on, “You remember Covid?”

Tony laughed. “How could I forget?”

“Then our worlds probably aren’t much different,” Omar decided. “But until half an hour ago, I wasn’t in your school, and you weren’t in mine.”

“So whose world is *this?*” Tony asked. “If we’ve both come from other places, is there anyone who’s stayed put?”

“I don’t know.”

They turned off Gleason Street, with Tony leading the way. A woman approached them. “Have you seen my son? Samuel?”

Omar said, “I’m sorry.” He’d never had a classmate by that name, and even if he had it wouldn’t have helped.

The woman grew distraught. “He can’t have just vanished!”

“Everyone seems to have . . . shifted around,” Tony explained.

“He’s a very quiet boy,” the woman stressed. “Very shy.”

“We don’t know where he is,” Omar replied, resisting the urge to start inventing search strategies that he had no reason to believe would succeed, just to offer her some comfort.

She grimaced and shook her head, but let them pass. They walked on in silence. Omar was half-wishing now that he’d parted from Tony earlier; it might not have improved his chances of getting back to his family, but either way, he was dreading having to watch his new friend coming to terms with his own loss.

“It’s down here,” Tony said, taking a final turn. “The fifth from the corner. At least the house numbers are all the same.” He laughed softly. “That neighbor’s lawn was almost dead, before.” The front yard they were passing was a lush, reticulated green.

A dog began barking, out of sight but not far ahead.

“Is that yours?” Omar asked.

“No, but it sounds just like Leon from next door.” Tony turned to him, excited. “What if *the animals* have all . . . ?” He trailed off, confused. Omar couldn’t blame him; any touch of familiarity seemed hopeful, but it was hard to flesh out a scenario in which someone else’s pet would guide him back to his own version of reality.

As they came to what should have been Leon’s house, a wiry gray-and-white dog ran back and forth behind the low garden fence, snarling at them. “It’s not him,” Tony admitted glumly. “His coat’s different.”

When they stopped outside number 12, Omar didn't press Tony to start listing changes. So, his neighbor's dog was new to him, and maybe the curtains or the letterbox here had been different when he'd left for school that morning. But if there were any exceptions to the shuffling of the deck, surely they'd be within families?

Tony walked up to the front door and took the key from his pocket. Omar approached, racking his brain for some words of consolation and encouragement he could utter when the inevitable happened.

Tony put the key in the lock, turned it, and opened the door.

Omar said, "Fuck me."

"Are you coming?" Tony asked impatiently.

Omar followed him inside.

There was some kind of poster hanging in the hallway, with Chinese characters in gold on red. In the kitchen, pictures on the fridge showed two children, a boy and a girl—the boy too young to be his host, but with roughly similar features. The girl was also much younger than ten, so they could just be old photos.

Tony opened the fridge and took out a jug of orange juice. "You want some?"

"Sure."

He poured two glasses and handed one to Omar. Omar took a sip, then looked around the room. "Is it similar?"

"Yes."

"You think your family still lives here?"

Tony nodded toward the fridge. "That kid's not me."

"Oh, man." Omar lowered his gaze. "That doesn't settle it, though," he reasoned. "If everyone's moved, your parents could still end up here, just like you did."

"Maybe." Tony drained his glass in silence.

Omar said, "You want to see if there's anything on TV?"

"The living room's through there." Tony gestured back down the hall. "I'll be there in a minute."

"Okay."

Omar found the room, and hunted for the remote. The TV was working perfectly, but as he flicked through the channels all he saw was cartoons and old movies.

He heard a toilet flush and water running, then footsteps approaching. "There's no news," he said, turning from the screen.

The boy standing in the doorway looked a bit like Tony, and was dressed much the same, but it wasn't him.

"What are you doing?" the boy demanded. "How did you get in here?"

"Tony let me in."

"Who's Tony? And what happened to Mehdi?"

Omar rose to his feet. "My name's Omar," he said. "I came here with Tony. He lives here; he had a key."

The boy said, "I have the key. And I came here with Mehdi."

Omar gazed back at him in silence, hoping he would at least reach the same conclusion.

"You replaced Mehdi, while I was in the bathroom?" the boy suggested.

"Or you replaced Tony," Omar replied. "Or both. I don't know the right way to think about it."

"So we're still moving? It hasn't stopped?" The boy scowled. "But all the time me and Mehdi were walking here, I didn't see anyone disappear off the street."

Omar said, "Me neither. But even from the start, nothing's changed right in front of my eyes, like a cut in a movie." It was more like one of those seamless tricks where they panned away from a group of people, then panned back to reveal some impossible alteration.

The boy remained in the doorway, regarding Omar warily. “What’s your name?” Omar asked him.

“David.”

“Do you want me to go?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” Omar had hoped that they might still be allies, inheriting some of the camaraderie that had led both pairs of newly met strangers to the same place. But if David was unsettled by his presence, he didn’t want to outstay a welcome that had been meant for someone else.

“Good luck,” he said, picking up his backpack. “I hope you find your family.”

“You too,” David replied.

Omar left the house and headed back the way he’d come. The dog that wasn’t Leon had been replaced by another dog with darker fur, though it barked at him with similar fury. The lush lawn near the corner hadn’t died, but it was much less verdant.

When Omar reached the twice-rebranded convenience store, he could see from the doorway that the checkout was unattended. He was starting to wish that he’d spent his money on something more substantial than chocolate milk, and he wondered if his last two dollars could at least get him a cheap pack of flatbread; he’d placed the coins in his pocket, and he could still feel them through the lining, pressing against his skin. But he was afraid to go inside now, lest the malleable world conspire to frame him as a shoplifter.

He walked on, but then he stopped in the street and opened his backpack, wondering if a previous owner might have stashed something edible. There was nothing inside but textbooks. Only half of the titles were familiar, but each book on its own seemed perfectly ordinary; when Omar flicked through them, the typeface and formatting remained consistent, the page numbers ascended in the usual fashion, and the subject matter didn’t jump from geography to mathematics halfway through.

He took out his phone and tried a PIN at random, with no luck, but maybe next time he’d chance on an unlocked state, and find his way into the settings to make that “permanent” . . . before passing on the favor to someone else.

Walking by the school, he saw half a dozen students playing soccer, all in their street clothes. They were shouting at each other, happily engaged in the game as if nothing in the world was troubling them. He could probably join them if he wanted; it wouldn’t matter if he never saw any of them again.

But he kept walking, back toward his house.

It was midafternoon now, and the streets were almost empty. Omar passed a middle-aged man coming the other way, pushing a stroller with a screaming toddler. The man wasn’t quite ignoring the child, but each time he glanced down he seemed to recoil and look away. A woman jogged by, staring straight ahead. Two primary school kids in broad-brimmed hats chatted volubly as they dawdled along; Omar couldn’t tell if they were long-time best friends, miraculously unseparated, or new acquaintances doing their best to make each other welcome.

He didn’t recognize any of these people, but the neighborhood itself still felt utterly familiar. Maybe if he’d been away for a few years it would have been the same, with a smattering of small differences too numerous to ignore but too minor to apprehend individually. Nothing he saw could begin to dent the conviction that this was his territory—still conforming to the map carved deep into his brain over the decade since his family had moved here, before he could remember, at the age of three.

When he reached number 77, he paused to take in the changes one by one. The geraniums in the flowerbed at the side of the yard had gone from red to purple. The paint on the front walls of the house was still white, but it was peeling from the eaves. The living room window was crystal clear, letting him see the grain in the wooden slats of

the venetian blinds behind the pane; it had been grubby before, and his mother had been nagging him to clean it.

As he approached the screen door, it looked less worn than he remembered, and when he opened it, it emitted a different creak than he was accustomed to. The front door bore faint dirty finger marks that were only noticeable because they were not quite where they should have been. But his key slid into the lock, and turned smoothly, and when he pushed on the door it opened.

Inside, the carpet in the hallway looked the same, but smelled newer. Omar hesitated, wondering if there might yet be a way to recover everything. If he backed out now and retraced every step since he'd left the house that morning, maybe he could undo all the changes.

That plan was absurd—but then, the whole situation deserved to be rejected for the same reason. This wasn't a dream, but it had to be a kind of fever. He couldn't banish it with feverish rituals; all he could do was stare it down and hope it would wear off.

In the living room, the family photos showed a couple his parents' age with three children, the eldest a girl. They might have been newly discovered cousins. Omar stared hard at the youngest boy in the portraits, his gaze penetrating the flesh. The little prick had stolen his cheekbones. Whatever subconscious casting director was orchestrating his breakdown, they seemed to have hired one of those forensic anthropologists who reconstructed people's appearance from their skeletons. That didn't really explain Rami turning into a woman, but then, he wasn't around to complain.

Omar went to the room that ought to have been his own. The bed, the desk, the chest of drawers were all in the right position. The bookcase was just as full as he'd left it, though some of the books had been swapped for other volumes, matching the size and shape of the originals more closely than their content.

His map of the world had been replaced by a star chart, and the blanket on his bed was different, but his desktop computer was, as far as he could tell, exactly the same. His father had forbidden him from putting a password on it; Omar hoped that was a universal prohibition, or at least one entirely determined by bone structure. He hit the power button, and waited for the thing to boot up.

The desktop appeared, with no login screen demanding authorization. Omar opened a web browser and tried to reach a few news sites, but they all returned errors; search engines and social media were the same. Wasn't the internet supposed to be so robust that it could weave connections around any obstacle? There were no broken streets, so why should there be broken fibers?

He leaned back in his chair, frustrated. The computer itself still worked—which meant the various components hadn't ended up incompatible, and nor had different portions of the software found themselves working at cross-purposes. But if that feat of integrity was like his textbooks managing to stay on-topic, maybe traffic on the net was suffering something more akin to a delivery driver turning up at what should have been Gino's Convenience, only to find that the paperwork for their consignment didn't match the business's new name. None of which explained how the whole phenomenon managed to walk the line between dreamlike incongruity and running a chainsaw through everything . . . though if it had gone wild on the scale of his own body and turned him into some kind of composite, he probably wouldn't have survived long enough to know about it.

He went back to the living room and tried the TV. Like the broadcasts he'd seen at Tony's house, there was no news interrupting the bland daytime schedule. Had the journalists who'd usually rush to cover any local disaster all given up and gone home, or was he picking up signals from stations where there'd been no disruption at all? In the advertising breaks, some of the brands and businesses were familiar; others were like the fictional ads embedded in a drama, where just enough had been

changed to avoid infringing anyone's trademark. But that still didn't tell him if the world these images came from was the world he was sitting in as he watched.

Omar left the house, walked around the block, and entered it again. The carpet was older now, the family in the photos was different, the star chart in his room was a poster of a rapper, and the computer he'd left powered up was no longer switched on.

He lay down on his bed and closed his eyes. The sheets smelled as if they'd been laundered with an unfamiliar detergent, but the mattress felt exactly right. Whenever he'd slept in a different bed, on a holiday or visiting relatives, he'd spent the night chafing like a runner in ill-fitting shoes. How could he be lost, how could he be exiled, when he could lie here, so at ease?

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway roused him from the edge of sleep. He jumped up—noticing in passing that the rapper had been usurped by a travel poster—and ran to the living room, where he peeked out through the blinds. The car was the same model as the one his family had had for the last few years, but he couldn't see the number plates, or the driver who'd just emerged.

As Omar stepped into the hallway, a man walked through the front door. He was wearing black trousers, a white shirt, and a dark blue tie. Omar didn't need to look at his face to be sure that it was his father; his mind had already filled in that final detail from all the other cues that led inexorably to the same conclusion.

But then he shifted his gaze a fraction, and his conviction shattered.

"What's your name, son?" the man asked gently. He couldn't hide his anguish at the absence of whoever he had hoped might still be here to greet him, but he'd clearly had time to brace himself for the likelihood of the encounter now unfolding.

"Omar."

"I'm Rafiq."

"What's happening?" Omar begged him, as if there was the slightest chance that any human actually knew.

"We've lost our families," Rafiq said. "And I don't know how we're going to find them. But in the meantime, we need to look out for each other—in the same way we hope some good-hearted strangers will be looking out for them."

Omar started weeping, and he began to lower his gaze in shame. Rafiq reached over and grabbed his jaw. "No," he said. "I know you have no reason to trust me. But the only way we can start to trust each other is if we stay in this together, side by side. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, uncle." Omar reached up and brushed the tears away with the heel of his hand, one eye at a time.

"I don't know if it's possible," Rafiq admitted. "But I don't know what else to try. If we're going to fight this together, we can't lose each other. We can't ever look away."

* * *

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Omar sat in the kitchen and watched Rafiq cooking. They'd found plenty of food in the fridge, and it had shown no tendency to vanish—or be magically replenished—when they closed the door and looked again.

Rafiq served the lablabi and invited him to eat.

Omar had been working up the courage to ask a question. "How did you get separated from your wife?"

"I was in the storeroom when it happened," Rafiq replied. "She was at the till."

"I'm sorry." Omar could picture his parents suffering exactly the same fate, in their own store.

"I asked the woman at the till to come here with me, but she said she was leaving Sydney to look for her daughter."

"I only have two brothers," Omar confessed. "No sister."

"And I only have three sons," Rafiq replied. "It looks like our families are closer than I thought."

Omar took another mouthful of soup and contemplated making a run for the door—not out of any ill will toward this man, but because he wanted the insanity to end. It was clear that nothing was ever going to change right before his eyes, which meant that as long as Rafiq was in front of him, he would never be reunited with his family.

But on all the evidence so far, rolling the dice wouldn't bring him any closer either. So maybe it made sense for people to try to form alliances while they learned how to handle the situation, even as they hoped it was all a temporary aberration that would somehow be set right.

"My son Adnan is so much like you," Rafiq added.

Omar was over the whole cheekbone thing. "When was he born?" he wondered.

"The 7th of August. He just turned thirteen last month."

"I'm thirteen, too, but I was born in February." Omar found that oddly satisfying: they were not weird doppelgängers who had walked the same path in lockstep all their lives. He'd been out in the world, gurgling and bawling, while Adnan was still in the womb.

They ran through the families' birthdays together; no one matched exactly, and Rafiq was more than a full year younger than Omar's father.

"There's no sense to any of this," Rafiq decided.

"But you both wound up owning the same store in Marrickville," Omar said. "You both have a son working as a bricklayer in Darwin, and another one studying at MIT."

"Where was your father born?" Rafiq asked him.

"Gafsa."

"Ah, the big smoke," Rafiq joked. "I was born in Métlaoui. Very close, but not the same."

Omar took their empty bowls over to the sink, trying not to feel self-conscious as Rafiq turned his chair around in order to keep him in sight.

"How are we going to feed ourselves, uncle?" he asked.

"I don't know yet," Rafiq replied candidly. "There are things we can try, but who knows what will work?"

Omar began washing the dishes. That they still had running water didn't surprise him; like the roads, he did not expect to see breaks in the pipes, and a full reservoir might function without maintenance for weeks. But the electricity felt more like a precarious miracle; even with solar panels and batteries everywhere, it seemed unlikely that the whole power grid could keep running without human intervention. Enough operators and engineers must have kept showing up at their jobs—working beside colleagues they'd never met, with no idea if they would ever be paid for their efforts—to keep the network functioning.

"I need to use the toilet," Rafiq announced, rising to his feet. Omar said nothing; he'd been dreading this moment, but given the way he'd ended up separated from Tony, he couldn't just pretend that he could keep a normal distance and everything would be fine. "I'll get a towel first," Rafiq added, miming wrapping it around his waist. Omar got the picture; at least they could retain a degree of modesty. In fact, he'd had his back to Rafiq half the time he'd been standing at the sink, and they hadn't parted worlds; staying together seemed to require only one of them watching the other.

Afterward, they sat in the living room—with the chairs suitably arranged—trying to make sense of what the TV disgorged. If they stuck with one channel it remained

coherent, with scene after scene from a single program, but if they flicked to another station and back they usually found themselves watching something different. Omar half wished that Rafiq would stop working the remote, so they could sit back and try to escape into some comedy or cop show on its own weird, pre-apocalyptic terms, but he knew that if that happened he'd just grow restless, wondering what vital news they were missing.

And then, a reporter stood outside Parliament House, addressing the camera.

“—who claimed to be the Prime Minister spoke earlier, calling on the people of the nation to do their best to help each other through the emergency.”

The reporter hesitated, then lowered his eyes and spoke quietly. “We don't have that footage?” He nodded glumly then looked back to his audience. “But the woman in question can no longer be located, and most offices in the building are empty now. If anyone really is in a position to take charge, they have not yet made themselves known. Back to you, Linda.”

The screen went blank. Omar waited, but no studio anchor named Linda or otherwise materialized to continue the story. After a few seconds, an ad for a gambling app appeared.

Rafiq said, “You should get some sleep.”

“What about you?”

“When you wake up tomorrow, I'll grab a few hours.”

Omar said, “What if I wake up, and you're gone? What if sleep breaks the connection?”

“Then you'll know that the whole thing's out of our hands,” Rafiq admitted. “Just remember to teach the other guys how to make good lablabi.”

When Omar climbed into bed, he left the desk lamp on, and Rafiq settled into a chair in the corner. Omar did not believe that this man might turn out to be some kind of child molester, but the only way he could accommodate another presence in the room was to half-pretend that he was still sharing it with Syed, who'd often sit studying long after Omar's bedtime. He was tempted to cover his face with his pillow to block out the light, but he was afraid that might also stop him being the person Rafiq was watching.

He'd thought sleep would be impossible, but after a while he found himself sinking into a pleasant stupor, convinced that none of what he'd seen throughout the day had actually happened.

* * *

3

Rafiq insisted on Omar eating breakfast, before trusting him to stay alert for his own shift as watcher.

Omar was anxious at the start, worried that his mind might wander and Rafiq would get the blackboard treatment. “Just wake me if you need to,” Rafiq had stressed. “If someone knocks on the door. If you need the toilet again. Anything. I won't be angry.”

Staring at a stranger sprawled across the bed he still thought of as belonging to his parents was unsettling, but Omar clung to the hope that, not only would they have approved, they were probably doing something similar themselves. And just because Rafiq had lost track of his own wife, that didn't mean his father and mother were apart. Maybe they were taking turns napping and watching over their foster-Omar, as they worked on their short-term plans for food, and their long-term plans for restoring the world to order.

When Rafiq rose, it wasn't even noon; he'd had less than four hours' sleep. Omar suspected they'd both need to aim for six, at least, if they were going to stay sane, but it wasn't his place to start lecturing an adult on the subject.

Rafiq filled some buckets in the laundry room with water; the supply was still flowing normally, but he wanted to be prepared in case it failed. Omar was prepared to find the buckets empty when they returned to the room, but that didn't happen; the buckets themselves changed color, but once the bulk of water was in place, it seemed to be as robust a feature of his world as any piece of furniture.

They each took a shower, keeping their underwear on, changing under a towel the way Omar's father had taught him to do at the public swimming pool. Omar was beginning to feel less self-conscious; he'd now survived every embarrassing necessity, and he believed he could grow inured to the routine. His father had made it through a year of compulsory military service in Tunisia; for loss of privacy and enforced proximity to strangers, that must surely have been even worse.

Lunch didn't exhaust their supplies of food, but it did extinguish any lingering fantasy that alter egos in some parallel world where the banking infrastructure had remained intact would devise a way to play poltergeist and slip care parcels into their pantry. The photos in the living room could manifest new faces a dozen times a day, while Omar's bedroom wall flipped effortlessly from the Periodic Table to the Declaration of Human Rights, but if they wanted to keep eating, they'd need to bring fresh ingredients into the house the normal way.

When they stepped outside there was no one else in sight, though Omar saw a neighbor's blind twitch. "We should try the store first," Rafiq said. "I ran out without taking any money, but the woman yelled after me that she'd leave half the cash."

The car hadn't changed overnight in any significant way: Rafiq didn't need to break the door locks for a second time, or repeat the surgery that allowed an easy hot-wire start. As they drove south toward the river, the traffic around them was sparse, but the vibe Omar felt was more public holiday than ghost town. The world hadn't ended: no one was dropping dead in the street, no buildings were on fire, no bridges had collapsed. Omar did not believe that his family were any more likely to be in harm's way than he was—and whatever had scattered them, he was sure it would eventually be understood, and reversed.

He had feared that there might have been looting, but as they turned into the parking lot at the back of the store, the premises looked perfectly intact.

"Ideal Electrics?" Rafiq protested. He caught himself and regarded Omar apologetically. "I'm sorry. If your father called it that—"

"Absolutely not," Omar assured him.

Name change notwithstanding, Rafiq's key still worked. Omar hadn't been to the store since the weekend, but inside, it was instantly familiar-but-strange, with a subtly wrong scent to everything, and an alien color scheme for the price tags.

Rafiq opened the till. "She kept her promise!" he announced, taking out a handful of bills. "Or . . . someone did." Cash was not a big fraction of the business, but if money still meant anything they could eat for weeks. Omar experienced an odd pang of emotion, halfway between a genuine response and the kind of thing a tearjerking movie might have wrung out of him. Maybe one or all of his "mothers" had deserted him to go chasing after their firstborn, but at least they'd left a decent child support payment behind.

Rafiq held up a twenty-dollar bill, frowning. "The whole thing *looks* right, but . . . have you heard of 'Mary Reibey'? I don't think that name was on my citizenship test."

Omar shrugged. "It looks right to me, too." Whatever it was, it wasn't counterfeit in the criminal sense. All they could do was see if anyone was willing to accept it.

They drove to a nearby market, which appeared to be doing plenty of trade. It was

only as they approached a vegetable stall that Omar spotted a handwritten sign that read: ALL BILLS VALUE \$5.

Rafiq muttered obscenities under his breath, but when they reached the stall he addressed the vendor calmly, pointing to the sign. “What’s this, brother? Would you take advantage of people at a time like this?”

The man shook his head, apologetic but firm. “You give me a hundred-dollar bill, and tomorrow I check it. Will it be a hundred, or will it be twenty? Ten? Five?”

Omar thought this actually sounded defensible, but Rafiq was not persuaded. “American bills are all the same size. But you know that’s not true here.” He fished out a twenty and a fifty, and lined them up together. Omar had never noticed before, but the higher denomination was at least five millimeters longer.

The vendor grew angry. “I lost my daughter yesterday.” He held up a hand with his thumb and forefinger a few millimeters apart. “You think someone promised you nothing would change by *that much*?”

“We’ve all lost people,” Rafiq replied, with genuine sympathy. “But this cash sat in my till all night, and it’s lost no value.”

“*Mashallah*,” the vendor replied, sarcastically. “But here, each bill is worth five dollars. No more, no less.”

Rafiq stood in silence for several seconds, then he nodded slightly. “Okay.”

They walked around the stall, selecting vegetables from what remained; they’d probably come late in a surge of panic buying, but between the problems with cash and the lure of less perishable alternatives, the shelves here had not ended up stripped bare.

Omar tried to quash his own disappointment and think through the competing claims about the banknotes. Things changed, but they didn’t change at random, even within the constraints of size; the posters on his wall never turned into sheets of butcher’s paper, or priceless works of art. Because, he supposed, they could only be things that someone else who’d lived a life much like his own had actually put there.

So, what could a polymer banknote become? Not just any random object of about the same size and shape, because no one would have reason to carry such a thing in their wallet, or keep it in their till.

And not every till would be the same. He’d never seen anyone buy a fridge or a TV and pay for it with five-dollar bills. But equally, who paid for their vegetables with fifties? So maybe both men were right: Rafiq’s fifties hadn’t turned into fives, but the stall owner couldn’t count on the same thing holding true.

They paid for the vegetables and moved on. The whole market had adopted the \$5 policy; by the time they were done, Omar guessed they’d spent half their cash on about a week’s worth of food.

They drove to a garden center, but all the seeds and seedlings for edible plants had sold out. Rafiq kept trying, visiting different horticultural outlets across the suburbs, until the battery range warning light came on.

Omar hadn’t been paying attention to the car’s navigation system, but when he looked from the console to the street signs around them, he realized that it was showing the car’s location as reliably as ever. It probably kept its own copies of the maps it used—only needing the internet for information about roadwork and traffic conditions—and the GPS signals themselves would be more like a one-way TV broadcast than an exchange of data over the net.

“If we could look down on the city from a satellite,” he wondered, “and our eyes were good enough to keep track of everyone . . . would we see people disappearing?”

“I doubt it,” Rafiq replied. “We don’t see that any other time.”

“So would that be enough to keep them all together, from their own point of view?” Omar tried to think it through, but it wasn’t obvious to him what the outcome would

be. "And if it was a machine watching, would that be just as good?"

Rafiq didn't answer. Omar dropped the subject; what mattered most right now was food. With their cash half-gone, what else was left? The washing machines and TVs in the store seemed likely to remain as stable as any other weighty objects, but the fact that no one had bothered to loot them suggested that they wouldn't be worth much.

"In the lockdowns," he said, "and the bushfires, a lot of people helped each other. Like those Sikh food trucks handing out meals."

"And Muslim groups, too," Rafiq protested.

"Do you ever go to mosque?" Omar's father was not religious at all.

"No, but credit where it's due. And of course you should feed your neighbors, if they fall on hard times and you have enough to share. But charity's not a bottomless well. The food has to come from somewhere in the end."

"Why should the farmers stop growing food?"

"Should they work for nothing? They still need to look after their families. They still need fuel and fertilizer."

"Why should the fertilizer factories shut down?"

Rafiq scowled. "And . . . what? Will the farmers pay them in sacks of wheat? And will the factory workers pay for everything in fertilizer? There's a reason people moved beyond bartering."

Omar said, "I know."

"Gold coins might work," Rafiq mused, "if we can be sure they won't turn into lead."

Omar had never seen a gold coin in his life, outside a pirate movie. "Will the people with gold coins hire everyone in the country, and pay us all in gold before the food runs out?"

"Probably not. Do you have a better idea?"

"Why can't we just keep doing all the things we were doing two days ago? It's not money that makes a crop grow, or keeps a factory running."

Rafiq said, "So if I go back to the markets, how much food should they give me, for free? How much food should the farmers give the markets? How much fuel should the oil refineries give the farmers?"

"As much as usual," Omar declared stubbornly.

"What does that mean? No one knows if I have twelve mouths to feed, or just one, so what's a fair amount of groceries to give me?"

"Why would anyone want more food than they can eat?" Omar protested. "It's not like they could sell it for money."

Rafiq said, "The black market would soon work something out."

"Didn't you just tell me that bartering doesn't work?"

"Not in a good way. You want criminals hoarding food, making the shortages worse, using that to build up power over everyone?"

Omar fell silent. If there had been a drought or a plague of locusts, he could have accepted that. But for people to accept that they'd all just have to starve when there was no physical reason for it seemed like a kind of collective masochism, above and beyond the suffering that had already been imposed on them.

When they got home, Rafiq put the car on the charger; the electricity grid still hadn't failed. The conversation about charity seemed to have pricked his conscience; he packed up a portion of the supplies they'd bought, and they walked three houses down the street.

"Who lived in 71, for you?" Omar asked, as Rafiq knocked on the door.

"Mrs. Bartoli. She was a widow, on her own."

An elderly woman opened the door, sparing Omar the embarrassment of having to confess that he knew nothing about his own world's equivalent.

She regarded them with a puzzled smile. "Can I give you these, ma'am?" Rafiq

asked. "I know how hard it is to do the shopping right now."

She squinted at him, as if she was trying to put a name to his face, but then she gave up and said, "That's very kind of you."

She let them in, and they left the food in her kitchen. The house looked well kept, but Omar had no idea what she'd do now that her pension had disappeared into the ether.

"Can we keep coming back?" he asked Rafiq as they headed home.

"We'll see," he replied. "If we can't feed ourselves, we can't feed a thousand different strangers as well."

After dinner, they watched TV for a while. Rafiq's channel hopping yielded no news, and he finally gave up and let an old movie called *Cliffhanger* run to completion. Omar guessed the TV stations got their movies over the net like everyone else, but they must have had a few days' worth of content sitting on their hard drives when their connections went down.

"Bedtime," Rafiq declared, as the credits rolled. Omar was sure he resented the tedious job ahead, but at least they'd each get a chance to escape into their dreams.

He hadn't been in his room since their trip to the markets; as he entered, he checked the poster to see what it had become. In its place were eight sheets of legal paper, taped together into one big rectangle. They looked like they'd been printed on his computer, and they were all exactly the same.

Rafiq read the heading: "Solidity." Omar detached a sheet and placed it on the desk so he could read the whole thing properly. "While we wait for the old world to return, we need to hold our nerve and not let things fall apart. We've all done this before, one way or another. We all know in our hearts what is right. We will help those who need our help. We will ask, without shame, for our own needs to be met. We will not cheat or deceive, steal or coerce, and nor will we withhold trust for no reason. We will do everything in our power to maintain solidity. If you can, spread the word. If you can, be an example."

There was no author named; at the bottom there was just a large S enclosed in a circle.

Rafiq regarded Omar with bemusement. "This sounds like something you might have written."

"Maybe Adnan wrote it," Omar replied.

For a moment, Rafiq looked like he was going to crumple. Omar said, "I'm sorry, uncle."

"It's all right." Rafiq recovered his composure. "But whoever it was, they were probably sitting right here an hour ago."

"Great minds think alike," Omar joked.

"Not that great, if they can't spell 'solidarity.'"

Omar didn't think it was a mistake, but he didn't want to argue about that. He said, "Is there anything here you disagree with?"

"It's a little naïve," Rafiq said. "But still, better to set your sights high than give up and do the opposite."

Omar used the scanner on his printer to make thirty copies, before the ink ran out. Then they walked down the street, slipping them under their neighbors' doors.

When he returned to his room, there was a poster of a Tunisian soccer player that neither he nor Rafiq had ever heard of. Omar took it down, and wrote out eight copies of the Solidity Manifesto by hand, to replace the ones that had vanished.

"What's the plan for tomorrow?" he asked.

"I don't know," Rafiq replied. "All we can do is play it by ear."

* * *

Omar cut one side off a cardboard box they found in the pantry, and drew the sign Rafiq had asked for. He said, "Once we put this on the front lawn, the words might change."

"All we can do is check it now and then," Rafiq decided. "And if anyone comes asking for tailoring services or judo lessons, tell them to walk around the block and try again."

Omar put the sign up, attaching it to the letterbox. Half an hour later, the first customer knocked on the door.

"Can you repair a washing machine?" the man asked.

Rafiq said, "It depends on what's broken, but I can try."

The man introduced himself as Trevor. The three of them went together to the shed to fetch some tools, then they walked to Trevor's house a few streets away.

Omar was surprised to find a woman inside, sitting in the kitchen as they passed through. Trevor nodded to her as if to acknowledge her presence, but neither of them spoke.

Trevor looked on as Omar handed Rafiq the tools he asked for. Once he had poked around for a while, Rafiq laughed with relief. "There's a belt that's come off, that's all." But the space around it was tight, and the components blocking the way were held in place with fasteners that needed a special tool to remove. He could pull and prod at the belt with a screwdriver, but whenever he tried to force it over the grooved disk that it was meant to wrap around, it just slipped off the screwdriver's blade.

"Let me have a go," Omar offered.

Rafiq said, "Be my guest."

Lying beside the machine, Omar managed to squeeze his hand through the gap without quite losing the ability to move his fingers. He caught the belt between his forefinger and his middle finger, and succeeded in dragging it into place.

Rafiq plugged the cord in, switched on the power, and tried the motor. The belt stayed where it belonged, and the agitator swung back and forth smoothly.

"Good job," Trevor said, as Rafiq screwed the back panel on again. "You want some sandwiches?"

Rafiq said, "Thank you."

There was a different woman in the kitchen, but she did not seem surprised or disconcerted by their presence. As Trevor took a loaf of bread from the cupboard, Omar asked her, "Did you see someone else come here, to fix the washing machine?"

"Of course, love."

"What were they like?"

She shrugged. "About the same age as you two. Pretty similar, I guess; I wasn't paying much attention. People come and go in the blink of an eye."

Omar felt queasy, but he ate the peanut butter sandwiches Trevor handed him, trying to keep everyone in the room in sight as he chewed the stale white bread.

They had three more jobs that afternoon: fixing a burst water pipe, reviving a failing freezer, and helping a couple hot-wire their car. The first customer had nothing to offer them, while the others paid in canned goods.

As dusk fell, Rafiq and Omar dropped in on number 71, and left the current resident, who said her name was Daniella, a tin of pumpkin soup.

"Did anyone bring you food yesterday?" Omar asked.

Daniella smiled. "How did you know? Are you working for the same charity?"

Omar said, "Not exactly."

As he sat watching TV, Omar felt as if his chest was about to burst open. Could his

father have been the ghost repairman who had pulled the freezer away from the wall, helped by his own apprentice, so that when Omar and Rafiq left the room and returned to find different colored melt stains on the side of the cabinet, the appliance they had never laid hands on was nonetheless in exactly the same position as the one they'd dragged across the floor?

He wanted to believe that. Because if it was true, all it would take would be one more round of musical chairs and suddenly he would be beside his father, Rafiq would be reunited with Adnan, his mother would meet up with Rami in Darwin, the internet would start working again, and they'd all get together with Syed over Zoom.

But why would his father have mimicked Rafiq's actions in such detail? It hadn't been true throughout their lives; they'd been born in different towns, more than a year apart. Whoever they were, the shadow crew weren't puppets, any more than he and Rafiq. They all did what they did for their own reasons, and their encounters with shared witnesses like Daniella were just a consequence of their actions coinciding—purely by chance, and only for a while.

* * *

5

"That must be a Superman fan who can't make a triangle," Rafiq joked as they drove past the house.

"Stop," Omar begged him. "They're offering free apples!"

Rafiq stopped the car, but then he hesitated. "Do we really need apples?"

"They'll go bad if they're just left there. And we can take a couple to number 71."

They walked up to the waist-high circle of bricks, mortared together with an S inside it; a few metal wires added extra support. There was no additional, written sign beside the sack of apples, but the invitation was clear. Omar put two in his jacket pockets, where they hung against the sides of his body, delivering enough tactile cues through the material that they were unlikely to morph into cricket balls. Then he tossed one to Rafiq and bit into a fourth himself.

They finished them, standing on the lawn, gnawing the cores down to stems that they placed in the household's green bin that was sitting on the verge awaiting collection. Omar had been woken by a garbage truck earlier in the day; like the power station workers, and the bus drivers he'd seen, the sanitation workers seemed intent on refusing to let the city sink into squalor.

"We should ask if they need anything," Rafiq suggested.

"Yeah." Omar knocked on the door, while Rafiq hung back a little to keep him in view.

A man opened the door, but Omar could see two young girls and a woman gathered behind him.

"Thank you for the apples," Omar said.

"You're welcome."

"We were wondering if we could do anything in return."

The man hesitated, then one of the girls tugged his hand and interjected, "Ask him!"

The man laughed. "You don't have a spare DVD player, by any chance?"

"I'm sorry."

"Do you not have one at all," Rafiq asked, "or do you still have a broken one?"

"A broken one. It's pretty old, though."

"There's a chance I can help," Rafiq said tentatively. "Can you watch us get some tools from the car?"

As the four of them emerged onto the front lawn, Omar saw that they were tied together like mountaineers, with a rope that ran from waist to waist. The woman introduced the family: she was Daisy, the girls were her daughters Nina and Lisa, and their father was Ivan.

Rafiq gathered his screwdrivers, soldering iron, and multimeter, and they all filed into the house. Following the family from room to room felt like a strange kind of party game. There were children's drawings taped to every surface in sight: misshapen people, houses and animals liberally sprinkled with glitter.

The family located the broken DVD player and took it to the living room. Omar looked on as Rafiq opened it up and began probing various points on the circuit board, while the girls asked Omar questions and their mortified parents tried to hush them. "Why isn't your mother with you?" "Do you have any brothers and sisters?"

Ivan caught his eye. "I'm sorry. They're too young to get it."

"It's okay," Omar replied. "You're lucky you were all together."

"Absolutely." But from the shadow that crossed Ivan's face it was clear that he was still mourning other losses.

"How's that?" Rafiq asked triumphantly; the player's menu had appeared on the TV screen.

The girls cheered.

"Do you have any DVDs to try?"

Daisy laughed. "Do we ever."

"How did you watch them before?" Omar wondered, as they all filed out of the room to collect them. The player had looked like it had been gathering dust since before the children were born.

"Through the computer," Daisy explained. "But we've lost the password."

"I could try to reset it," Rafiq offered.

"Oh, we've done that a couple of times. But it never lasts."

The first movie they tried worked perfectly. The girls were ecstatic, and Rafiq nodded toward the door, suggesting they slip away.

"Did you make the S yourself?" Omar asked Ivan.

"No. There's a couple of bricklayers driving around, offering to build them."

"Cool."

They excused themselves and left. "We should get our own Solidity symbol," Omar suggested, as they returned to the car.

Rafiq was dubious. "It would just mean people knocking on the door all the time, expecting food we can't give them."

"It's not about food; it's about trusting each other."

"I'd rather earn people's trust by what we do."

"But they'll never meet us again," Omar protested. "An S in the front yard would mean they can trust whoever lives there."

Rafiq laughed. "Until it doesn't. Until everyone who wants to deceive people decides it's a useful shortcut."

* * *

6

The woman on the doorstep introduced herself as Leanne. "Would you be willing to volunteer to do some food deliveries?" she asked. "Once a week, just in the local area?"

Rafiq regarded her warily. "Food from where?"

Leanne said, "From the supermarkets. A certain amount of stock is still coming to us, from the usual sources. The ordering systems are kaput, but everyone knows

what used to go where, so for now they're just sticking to what they remember."

"Really?"

"Some gets skimmed along the way," she admitted, "but most of it's getting through."

"So let the supermarkets pass it to their customers," Rafiq suggested. "If they're getting it for free, let them hand it out for free." Omar stayed quiet, but he couldn't help smiling; he was sure he could recall Rafiq mocking that idea when he'd suggested it himself.

"I'm a supermarket manager," Leanne replied, "so I can tell you why I don't want to do that. We get rushed, we get stampedes, we get hoarders. Our workers get hurt—especially if they try to enforce limits."

"All right, I can believe that," Rafiq conceded.

"Even if people only take reasonable quantities, our staff can't police return visits. The only way to get a fair amount to everyone is to subcontract that to local distributors, who can take it right to the door. Your neighbors might look different every time you see them, but you'll still know what you've delivered to each household."

Rafiq grimaced. "So you want me to pass food on to a few dozen neighbors?"

"Yes."

"Food that comes to me . . . how?"

"Our drivers will bring it to your house."

"How will they know where to come? Whatever you write down, or put in a computer file—"

Leanne said, "I have a map of the area on the floor of my stockroom. If I put a pebble on it, it doesn't move; I've tested that, it's always in the same place when I come back."

"So if I agree, you'll put a pebble there to mark my house?"

"Yes. The drivers look at the map and memorize the addresses they'll be going to."

Rafiq rubbed his temple, clearly struggling to assess the integrity of the system. "What if someone else who lives in this house doesn't agree?"

"Then they won't get a delivery, because for them there won't be a pebble on the map."

"What if they agree, but then decide to steal the food? And people come blaming me?"

Leanne said, "Anything substantial in a different place will keep you separate from them. We've all seen how that works: nothing heavy moves around for no reason."

"What about my delivery area?" Rafiq pressed her. "You tell me which houses I should cover, but what if another manager allocates things differently?"

"It will all be done with stones on the map," Leanne replied. "You can come and see the layout for yourself, if you like."

They went with her to inspect the setup. Rafiq examined the map and spoke with one of the truck drivers.

"Anyone ever try to hijack you?" he asked.

"No," the driver replied. He nodded toward a crate of pineapples. "What are you going to do with those, that would make it worth the hassle? Unless people are actually starving, they're not going to bow down to you for a piece of fruit."

"We're not there yet," Rafiq observed glumly.

The driver said, "So how about we try to keep it that way?"

* * *

Omar was slapping his own face to stay alert when, between the thwacks, he heard a scraping noise coming from in front of the house, and several voices trying unsuccessfully to whisper.

"Uncle, wake up!" he said.

Rafiq didn't stir; Omar prodded his shoulder and repeated the plea, until Rafiq opened his eyes.

"What's happening?"

"I think someone's trying to steal the car."

They made their way to the living room together without switching any more lights on; there was enough illumination to see where they were going, but Omar was afraid for a moment that the dimly lit figure in front of him might turn around and reveal a new face.

Rafiq, still Rafiq, peered out through the blinds and sighed. "I don't think they'll have much luck, but they're going to leave a few scratches." He'd welded brackets onto the doors with holes for some very large padlocks, the shackles too thick for most bolt-cutters.

"They might break the windshield," Omar fretted.

"Not without a sledgehammer."

Omar moved closer to the window and tried to position himself to get a glimpse between the slats without losing sight of Rafiq. There were four youths standing around the car; two were trying to prize open the front door with crowbars, while the other two stood guard, holding baseball bats.

The streetlights were bright enough to show their faces. They all seemed giddy and elated, reveling in the excitement of the act—while making no effort to keep each other in sight. Omar had visited households where the inhabitants had gone solo, but most had been as glum as the transient residents of a short-stay boarding house. He had never seen a group like this, enthralled by a common purpose but entirely oblivious to each other's identities.

"Someone's watching!" one of the guards announced. He must have noticed his companions' unexpected stability; he looked around, scanning the street, but then settled on a closer target.

"Get back!" Rafiq whispered. As they retreated from the room there was a shattering noise; Rafiq pulled the door closed behind them, then took hold of the handle. There was no lock; if anyone tried to come through, it would be down to his grip on that piece of metal whether they were kept at bay or not.

"I should have put bars on all the windows," he lamented. Omar listened to the thugs laughing and yelling, but it didn't sound as if they'd braved the broken glass and climbed into the room.

After a few minutes, the voices went silent. Rafiq opened the door; the living room was empty. "We can clean that up in the morning," he said. "Then start on the bars."

As a temporary measure, they moved a table into the hallway and tied the door handle to it with several loops of wire. Omar's heart was still racing. The street had always been quiet before. He'd never heard of a single neighbor being burgled.

"We might as well swap now," Rafiq decided. "You sleep, I'll keep watch."

Omar lay in bed with his eyes closed, replaying the event in his head. As rattled as he was, he couldn't deny that alongside his fear he felt a trace of envy. He wasn't going to weep like a child because he missed Bruno and Tuan, but the prospect of never walking down the street with anyone he could talk to the way he could with them felt like a kind of torture. And if he could never hope to have an ordinary friend again—one with whom he shared a history—maybe the car thieves had the next best thing. They had made a plan and committed to it, regardless of exactly who was standing beside them.

But the more he dwelled on the notion of a camaraderie so pure that it transcended every comrade's identity, the more he began to recoil. He had no problem delivering food to neighbors he'd never see again, but reducing his whole life to a piece of

theater so generic that anyone could step into the roles would just be a new kind of nightmare.

And he hadn't even witnessed the version with an endless flow of understudies: while he'd watched the thieves, the same four actors had remained together in a single troupe.

If he could do that, unwittingly—if he could bind four people together when they would otherwise have drifted apart—what else could achieve the same result?

He'd fantasized about looking down on the city from space—and for all he knew, a satellite engineer somewhere might be working on exactly that project. But in the meantime, there had to be smaller steps that ordinary people could take.

* * *

8

“Are you trying to get five Michelin stars from all your lab rats?” Martin joked, as he started on the lunch Rafiq had prepared.

“Of course,” Omar replied. It was a simple meal, but anything homemade was more enticing than the canned food most people were relying on, and with the aroma of freshly baked bread lingering, perhaps it did seem like a moment of artisanal luxury.

Valerie was more subdued, but she seemed just as satisfied with the food. Omar still wasn't sure how he'd managed to lure these two solos off the street with nothing but a promise of bread and hummus and an earnest declaration that it was all in the aid of science. Maybe they were both carrying knives and were confident that they could fend off any attempt by three other strangers to harm them. Or maybe they'd been longing for a chance to carry out exactly this experiment themselves.

When they'd finished eating, they all went into the living room. Omar had set up his computer with the webcam positioned to capture a view of the two armchairs facing in opposite directions. He started the video recording software, and turned to the participants to reiterate the instructions.

“Please just sit in the chairs in silence. Don't talk to each other, don't look at each other. It will only be for five minutes.”

“Have you got something I could read?” Valerie asked.

Omar said, “Sorry, I don't want to complicate things with extra objects.” A woman reading could only be replaced by another woman reading, and the control subjects the previous day had not been allowed any distinguishing props.

“All right.” Valerie steeled herself. “See you later, then. Or at least . . . someone with the same plan.”

Omar followed Rafiq out of the room, into the backyard—far enough away that nothing about their own presence ought to be detectable by the participants.

“If you can keep a couple together by having them sit in silence with their backs to each other, you should probably start a marriage counseling business,” Rafiq teased him.

Omar said, “If they fall for each other, I'm taking no credit. You did that, with the food.”

Rafiq smiled. “My cooking didn't keep the controls together, did it?” He'd taken some persuading to go along with the study, but now that they were actually doing it, he'd become as enthusiastic as Omar.

Omar checked the time on his phone, the only thing it was good for. “Still three minutes to go.”

“If you want to pass the time, do sixty push ups,” Rafiq suggested. “I'll count them for you.”

"No, they'd hear me breathing a mile away."

"Ah, there's always some excuse. With no school and no sport, you really need to keep fit somehow."

Omar hoped this was just faux-parental nagging about his general well being, and not a desperate preparation for a state of dog-eat-dog anarchy. The bars on the windows had made him feel safer on one level, but seeing the same thing all around the neighborhood had left him with a dismaying sense that all the fortress building might become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

When the five minutes were up, they returned to the living room. A man and a woman were sitting in the chairs, facing away from each other, but they bore only a superficial resemblance to Martin and Valerie.

Omar walked over to the computer and tore the masking tape off the indicator light beside the webcam. It wasn't lit. He forced himself to stay calm, and addressed the couple quietly. "Thanks for taking part. Do you mind telling me exactly what you were told would be happening, by the other experimenters?"

The man recounted the spiel he'd been given. The woman's version was phrased a little differently, but both followed the same basic idea as Omar's protocol. They'd never seen each other until he came into the room and released them from their promise, but at least they hadn't ended up in the house for some entirely different set of reasons.

Rafiq said, "Thank you, we really appreciate your help."

"So, this was a control, right?" the woman asked. "To test what would happen if you didn't switch the camera on?"

"Exactly."

As he closed the front door, Rafiq turned to Omar. "Does that count as a failure?"

"It doesn't count as a success." Maybe Martin and Valerie had remained together in another version of the living room, thanks entirely to the camera Omar had switched on—to the delight of another team of experimenters . . . and perhaps their confusion, too, if they'd been aiming for a control—but he had no evidence about it, either way.

"So we try again tomorrow."

* * *

9

As Omar walked down Gleason Street, the wind blew a stream of flyers past his feet. He squatted down and picked up a handful.

"Anything interesting?" Rafiq asked.

There were two copies of the Solidity Manifesto, in a bilious green that was probably the result of someone with no black ink left in their printer trying to make do with a color cartridge whose magenta had run low.

There was a proclamation under the "Emergency Workforce Act of 2028," requiring the members of a list of professions to show up for their jobs, while also compelling the public in general to provide "aid and sustenance" to anyone they "reasonably believed" to fall into the same categories. Omar had no idea if a parliament somewhere really had managed to convene and pass this law, or if the whole thing was just a well-intentioned hoax.

And there was a poster of a man wanted for murder, though it was not clear from the text beneath the mug shot whether the poster's creator knew for sure that the man portrayed was on the loose, or whether they had felt obliged to release his replacement from their own custody, and had glumly assumed that their counterparts, wherever their suspect had ended up, had done the same.

Rafiq stopped reading over his shoulder; he'd spotted a potential volunteer. "Excuse me, sir," he called out to the solo. "We're trying to see if we can keep people together just by using video cameras. Would you be willing to take part in an experiment to test that?"

The man stopped walking, and beamed at them delightedly. "I absolutely would, but in return you need to be part of my own experiment."

Rafiq was taken aback. Omar asked the man, "What are you testing?"

"Brick biographies."

"Ummm. . . ?"

"I'll show you," the man insisted. "It will only take two minutes; my house is just around the corner. Then I'll come and do your camera thing."

Omar looked to Rafiq. It wasn't impossible that a solo had formed an elaborate plan, as part of some Ship-of-Theseus gang, to lure people into an ambush—but he was asking for less trust than the two of them had asked of him.

Rafiq said, "Sure."

The man introduced himself as Evan, and true to his word, his house wasn't far. They followed him inside, and he led them to a room that looked like it might have once served as a nursery; the wallpaper bore a motif of bears holding balloons. But it contained no furniture now. Arranged on the bare floorboards were dozens of bricks, spelling out the message: MY NAME IS EVAN CHRISTOPHER WILLIAMS. BORN 8 SEPTEMBER 2002. MY WIFE ALICE BORE MY SON GRAHAM ON 15 APRIL 2028.

Rafiq said, "I'm sorry about your family."

"Everyone's lost people," Evan replied. "This isn't a plea for sympathy; I'm just trying to set down an anchor."

"When did you do this?" Omar asked.

"Yesterday. But I only finished it last night, so I haven't had a chance to see what effect it has."

"At least it was still here when you came back," Rafiq noted.

"Yeah. But now I want you two to come back here tomorrow."

Omar said, "Of course. But we can't ask you to join our own experiment now; if you stay connected to us, we won't know if it's the camera or the bricks."

Evan was disappointed, but he accepted the argument, and they assured him that they'd still honor their commitment.

They returned to Gleason Street, and after half an hour of begging they managed to persuade two other solos, Kieran and Daniel, to join them.

Back at the house, the four of them shared a meal together, then Omar started the recording, sending the video app into the background so its window no longer showed on the screen.

In the backyard, Rafiq said, "No one would keep doing controls forever, would they?"

Omar had no idea, but as far as he could tell he'd always encountered people whose history seemed unexceptional. This was only their third trial, so it would not be all that strange if some other experimenters were still running controls. But by the fifth trial? The tenth? If the webcam was still refusing to stay on, it would start to look as if the universe was going out of its way to mock them.

When he walked down the hall and turned into the living room, he saw that Kieran and Daniel were gone. He checked the computer; the web cam light was on, and the video app was still running in the background.

He halted the recording, and addressed the two strangers. "Thanks for taking part. My name's Omar, and that's Rafiq. Can I ask if you came in here together?"

They had already turned to face each other, and they were grinning with surprise and delight.

"Yes we did," one of the men replied.

The other nodded. "It looks like it actually worked. I'm Colin, by the way."

"I'm Pedro," the first man added.

"Do you want to see the replay?" Rafiq asked.

The four of them sat and watched the recording. Omar felt a chill as a young cheekbone-thief squatted in front of the camera finishing the setup, while a middle-aged man stood in the doorway; despite all the family photos, he'd never seen a home movie of any of the house's other occupants before. But what really mattered was that Colin and Pedro had been paired from the start. And they hadn't cheated, they hadn't messed with the protocol. They both looked bored out of their skulls, but they hadn't spoken, or turned to peek at each other, for the entire five minutes.

"So far so good," Pedro said. "But how do you scale it up?"

"We're going to need more experiments," Omar said. "And a way to send video wirelessly. I'm hoping that if we start recording from two cameras into one video file—like a split-screen—then people who start out in the same place and wander around separately with the cameras pointed at them will still be together when they return."

"Do you have that kind of equipment?" Colin asked.

"Not yet," Rafiq replied. "But if you spread the word about what happened here, it might reach someone who can take the whole idea further straight away."

* * *

10

They managed to get four jobs in the afternoon, all of them paid in food. Omar went to bed tired but happy. Maybe the camera trick was nothing when judged against the scale of the disaster, and he might as well be celebrating finding a roll of duct tape while the house was dragged up into the sky by a tornado, but for now he didn't care. He'd tamed one tiny whirlwind, and he wasn't done trying.

When he woke, he could tell without opening his eyes that it was still night. He could hear Rafiq, over by the desk, breathing irregularly in a kind of controlled sobbing.

Omar thought about rising and trying to comfort him, but what he could say? The success they were both so proud of wouldn't bring either of them closer to their families. If their most grandiose dreams came true, and people ended up pinning the whole world down the way it used to be, that would almost certainly mean that everyone remained lost and scattered—with a chance to put down new roots, but no hope of recovering the old ones.

* * *

11

"That's the house, isn't it?" Rafiq asked.

"Yes," Omar affirmed. "Number 93, I remember."

Rafiq knocked on the door. After a minute, a young man Omar hadn't seen before opened it, barefoot and bleary-eyed.

"Can I help you?"

"We're looking for Evan," Rafiq explained. "He asked us to drop in this morning. I hope it's not too early."

The man said, "I'm Evan."

The three of them stood in silence for a moment.

“Is your birthday the 8th of September?” Omar asked.

“Yes. How did you know that?”

Rafiq said, “The bricks. I mean, someone else who put the bricks down showed us.”

Evan digested this. “Why don’t you come in?”

He led them to the nursery. The wallpaper portrayed rabbits, swallows and acorns, but the mini-biography in bricks was exactly as Omar remembered it.

“You didn’t show this to anyone yourself, yesterday?” Omar asked.

“No,” Evan insisted. “Has it changed for you?”

“No,” Rafiq replied.

“So it works. Up to a point.” Evan regarded his handiwork despondently.

“Maybe if you add more detail,” Rafiq suggested. “It’s hard to write much with bricks, but I bet if you carved letters deep enough into the walls, they’d persist.”

“Maybe.”

As they left the house, Rafiq seemed to warm to the idea himself. “We should do that. The cameras look promising, but we need to try every method we can think of.”

Omar couldn’t argue with that, even if it felt stranger than ever to imagine sharing the house only with those cheekbone-thieves who also shared his name and birthday. “I wonder if any genome sequencing labs are still operating,” he joked.

Rafiq said, “All those C, A, G, Ts? I’d probably make a thousand errors, and hand the house over to a pack of mutants. Do you know your blood type?”

Omar tried to summon it up, but failed. “I used to.” It was written down somewhere.

“I’m A negative.”

Birthdays were a lot more specific than blood types, and even that hadn’t been enough for Evan, but Omar supposed every additional factor would help. In any case, the whole idea seemed to cheer Rafiq up. Maybe he’d feel better just writing out his family’s history—as if that could draw him nearer to them. Omar pictured himself walking into a room engraved like a shrine of remembrance, to find Adnan beside him, summoned by his story. The ghost brothers would share a solemn embrace, then point each other to where their fathers were waiting.

They’d just arrived home when a customer came, wanting a leaking roof repaired. She offered two jars of tomato paste, but while Rafiq and Omar were on the roof, with the customer peering up from the backyard, she stepped out of sight, and the replacement who emerged denied ever making such a deal. Rafiq was gracious, and departed without making a fuss; they often did small jobs for no payment. But Omar could see the resentment eating away at him as they drove back to the house.

After lunch, Rafiq said, “I hope you didn’t have any plans for the spare room.”

That had been Rami’s bedroom until he left, but even before the disaster Omar’s parents had cheerfully repurposed it.

Rafiq fetched a power drill and a masonry bit. Omar said, “Please don’t drill into the wiring, my CPR isn’t that great.”

Rafiq donned his safety glasses. Omar stood back and watched him attack the wall.

MY NAME IS RAFIQ MESSADI. I WAS BORN ON 3 APRIL 1986 IN REDEYEF, TUNISIA.

When Rafiq paused to blow away brick dust and let the bit cool down, Omar said, “You mean 1988?”

“No.” Rafiq laughed. “I know my own birthday!”

“Of course. I just thought you might have missed closing the top loop.”

Omar was sure he remembered calculating that Rafiq was younger than his father, who’d been born in 1987. But maybe he’d got things backward; on that first night he’d still been in shock.

Redeyef, though? His mother had been born in Redeyef. If Rafiq had told him before that he’d been born there, it would have stuck in his mind.

Omar folded his arms and began swaying gently. *How many Rafiqs had he shared the house with? Two? Three? A dozen?* He had no complaints; they had all treated him well, sharing the hope that someone would do the same for Adnan. Though as he watched the biography unfolding, there was no Adnan recorded; this Rafiq's youngest child was named Nayef.

Omar listened to the whining of the drill; if he turned and fled, his footsteps would be lost in the noise. Forget the cameras, forget the carved biographies; nothing would ever be enough. Not a parent doting on a newborn child, not a pair of lovers at each other's side. What kind of life lay ahead for him, if even his own wife and children would be forever slipping away? Wouldn't it be better to be honest and embrace the truth right now? Walk out of the house and find some gang of thieves who'd take him in, without caring who he was, who he had been or would be?

But he stood his ground and kept his gaze fixed straight ahead. He started screaming, bellowing with all his strength. Rafiq switched off the drill and turned to him, alarmed. He tore off the goggles and approached tentatively.

"What is it? Omar? What's wrong?"

Omar kept bellowing, but he refused to close his eyes. Rafiq put a hand on his shoulder and met his gaze, then joined him, screaming with rage and grief.

* * *

12

"Pick an eight-digit number, and commit it to memory. Then type it into the computer and hit the return key."

Omar chose the last eight digits of his old phone number; this wasn't like a password that needed to be difficult for an adversary to guess.

When he was done, Cathy led him into an adjoining room, closing the door behind them. "There are some tools here," she said, pointing to a bench-top. "I'd like you to open up that gray box, plug in the unit beside it with the ribbon cable, press the red button, wait for the LED to turn green, then remove the unit and reseal the box."

Omar wasn't sure how much of this related simply to dexterity and the ability to follow instructions, and how much would be measuring something more elusive, but he set about completing the task. To release the cover of the box, he needed to apply a fair bit of pressure with the Phillips-head screwdriver to keep it from slipping as it turned, and the red button was recessed in a hole so deep and narrow that neither his fingers nor the screwdriver could reach it, requiring him to use a tool like a blunt needle to prod it. When he did, a red light came on at the top of the panel. He stared at it for what must have been two minutes, trying not to let his anxiety show, but just when he was at the point of asking if he'd failed the test, the light turned green.

He unplugged the ribbon cable, and put the cover back on the box.

"Good work," Cathy said. She opened the door and invited him back into the first room. "Now enter the same number as before into the laptop."

Omar typed the digits with scrupulous care, afraid that if he made a mistake some kind of siren would start blaring and he'd be ejected from the building before he had a chance to correct the error. When he hit the return key, the computer responded: *Match*.

Cathy said, "All right, then. You want to join the team?"

"Absolutely."

She opened a new program on the laptop, and said, "Hold down the authorization button on your camera." Omar complied, and the view of his head from the device on his right shoulder appeared on the screen. "Your feed will be logged alongside my own, and the other people you're working with. Are you okay with that?"

“Yes.”

“Come back tomorrow, eight o’clock sharp.”

Omar walked out into the sunshine. He raised his face to the sky, letting the warmth strike his skin, and closed his eyes. When he opened them and looked down, it was a struggle to spot any changes. One camera-less woman, far down the street, was wearing a different dress. A poster for a music festival stapled to an electricity pole had changed color, from salmon pink to green.

When he got home, he walked down to number 71 to see how Mrs. Capaldi was. She’d just washed a load of laundry, so he helped her hang it out.

“Can I sweep the floors?” he asked. He could see that her back had been playing up. “Thank you.”

When he was done, she made him a cup of tea and they sat in the kitchen.

“I got a job today,” Omar told her.

“You’re too young to be working,” she scolded him.

“I’ll go back to school when it opens. But this is important; I’ll be loading new software into the broadband nodes. Eventually we’ll have the internet working again.”

Mrs. Capaldi looked dubious. “Have you studied enough to do that?”

Omar laughed. “I didn’t say I wrote the software! They just need people who are stable enough to install the same version all along the network.”

“Hmm.”

Omar drained his cup. “Can I write something for you in your diary?”

“Nothing happened to me today,” she said. “Just make something up.”

“I can’t do that.” Omar fetched the engraving tool, and a fresh sheet of copper from the stack in the living room. “Tell me what you want me to write.” He had no wish to invade her privacy, but her hands were too shaky to do the job herself, and there was no need for the record to contain anything especially intimate, or even true. She just needed to pin a few things down, enough to stay in touch with the world around her.

“I had a dream about my husband last night,” she recalled. “He was shoving all our vinyl LPs into the microwave.”

Omar started engraving.

As he was preparing to leave, he asked, “I can’t get you to wear a camera?” He wasn’t sure if anyone had raised the subject with her before.

Mrs. Capaldi grimaced. “No, that’s not for me.”

“All right. I’m sure someone will drop in to see you tomorrow.”

“It will be you, Omar, won’t it?”

He didn’t want to quibble. “More or less.”

At home, he reheated the leftovers from the night before; they had some different spices than the ones he’d used himself, but they were still quite tasty.

He was washing up when he heard the key in the lock. He dried his hands and turned toward the kitchen doorway.

“How’s it going?” the man asked, with a kind of forced breeziness. “I’m Tallal. What’s your name?”

“Omar.”

“Do you mind if I sit down?”

Omar gestured at a seat beside the table. “Have you eaten?”

“I’m fine, thanks.”

Omar took a seat facing his guest. “I didn’t hear a car,” he said.

“Oh, that . . .” Tallal waved the matter away. “I won’t waste your time with my whole life story,” he said. “It doesn’t matter who I am, or who you are. I just know this: you must miss your family as much as I miss mine.”

He waited for Omar to respond, but when he received no reply he continued. “I spent a few months in this house, with a kid who was a bit like you. And I did my

best to look after him. But in the end, it was no life for either of us. Everyone needs their own family back."

Omar said, "And if we could have that, don't you think we would?"

"You've got something holding you down, haven't you?" Tallal challenged him. "I scraped my own stupid shit off the wall, but every time I visit here, it's Omar, Omar, Omar. Your namesakes don't all look the same yet, but I can tell their story's growing, narrowing the focus. So I know you've got it carved in stone somewhere."

"Somewhere safe," Omar agreed.

Tallal regarded him sadly. "You really don't want to see your father again? Because you know you can't while I'm blocking the way—through no fault of my own, trapped by all the Omars."

Omar said, "What I know is that he's not coming back. Whatever I want, whatever I write, whatever I do. I've made my peace with that."

Tallal nodded. "I understand; you don't want to get your hopes up. But you haven't changed the lock, have you? What's that all about?"

"It just means I know you'd smash the door down."

Omar waited in the kitchen while Tallal went through the house, hunting for the engraving that he was convinced was robbing him of his happiness.

When he was done, he stood before Omar, sweating and angry.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "Because who knows what that would do to my son? But if I stick with you for long enough, I'll find it. You know that. So why don't you just save us both the time?"

"I had a good friend called Rafiq," Omar said. "He helped me a lot, and then he had to leave—like you did. But I'll tell you, honestly, I don't believe he ever came back to this house. I think he's living somewhere with the new friends he's made, doing the best he can."

"If he was your friend," Tallal insisted, "you'd give him his son back."

"If it was in my power," Omar replied, "every last one of us would be reunited. But it's not. You know in your heart that's impossible."

When Tallal left, Omar went to bed, propping the camera up beside him on its charger. He pictured the new grid of images being logged, his face beside Cathy and the colleagues he'd be meeting tomorrow. Most of them would be in other grids, too, like he was, in an intertwined mesh of overlapping images that would only keep growing, gradually stretching out to bind the whole city together.

His mother and father, Syed and Rami, Bruno, Tuan, and Rafiq, all his cousins, aunts and uncles, might be unreachable, but they'd have as much of a chance as he had to build new lives. If he gave in to his grief there would be nothing left for him but prowling the streets like Tallal, pretending he could bring them back.

If he could find a way to be happy, that would prove that it was possible that they'd found a way, too. It was the only thing he could do for them now, and it had to be enough.