

BOOKISH PEOPLE

A NOVEL

SUSAN COLL



HARPER MUSE

Bookish People

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CHAPTER 1

Friday

THE GALLEY

To be clear, Sophie Bernstein did not throw a book at Zhang Li.

By the time the closing shift learned about the incident from the afternoon swing shift, however, the details of this otherwise routine meeting had become so exaggerated that to hear it, you might think Mrs. Bernstein had committed an act of aggravated assault on the young sales representative.

Zhang, who works for one of the country's largest publishing conglomerates, had been in the midst of presenting that spring's offerings when the coffee spilled, or perhaps technically speaking, splattered.

It is true that this was not a completely random event. A galley—an advance copy of a book—was sent aloft, and when it landed on top of the flimsy cardboard cup, on the side of which had been written “Zhang Skim Cap,” it resulted in

an explosion of the contents. Some drops of coffee, rapidly expelled, splashed onto Zhang's white dress.

They were already twelve minutes into the meeting, so the coffee, which had been procured from the shop on the corner, was mercifully no longer scalding hot.

Mrs. Bernstein later said it was possible that, instead of tossing the galley in the air, she had slammed it on the table. She couldn't say for sure. Whether the galley was tossed or slammed, Mrs. Bernstein's gesture was intended to emphasize her frustration about having to look at yet another book jacket featuring a woman's feet.

She had grabbed a roll of paper towels and blotted the liquid up from Zhang's sleeve—and from the table and the carpet, and also from the wall. She apologized profusely and promised to pay for Zhang's dry cleaning, or if need be, a new dress. There had been handshakes, apologies, and appropriately, no hugs.

Mrs. Bernstein was reasonably sure the meeting ended on a better-than-neutral note, with her promising to follow up with an order of several of the titles that Blowfish, the imprint that employed Zhang, was featuring next spring.

Really, it had seemed to end well enough. So Mrs. Bernstein was surprised to see that Zhang appeared to be on the verge of tears as she headed for the door.

CHAPTER TWO

Saturday

THE DARKNESS

Sophie does not wish to be at this party, watching her employees get drunk and rowdy. She wants to go to the bookstore, the one that she owns, the one that is causing her deep ambivalence and massive stress.

It is counterintuitive, she knows, that she finds herself longing to be in the very place that is the nexus of her angst, but she has a plan to remedy this contradiction. She is building a refuge inside the store. A room of her own. She has not yet taken up occupancy, but she is slowly preparing to nest. She has even begun to move some essentials—her electric kettle, a small satchel of clothing, a bag stuffed with cash—into the little nook, just behind the Fiction room.

It's an architectural fluke, this cozy, tiny space, this little house for a mouse, this parallel universe accessed by depressing a button in the corner of the shelf currently

occupied by Graham Greene, although that is not an always reliable landmark since the location of his oeuvre shifts seasonally depending on the alphabetical crapshoot of the latest crop of books. Over the course of many years she has watched various established authors' perches shift radically, like Toni Morrison, who last spring migrated across two entire shelves, and then by the end of the summer season returned to where she began, like the ebb and flow of beachfront sand.

Regardless of which books front the access panel, her private room is there, a constant. No one else knows about it, as far as she knows, apart from Ibrahim, the architect who designed the store and who still helps her out from time to time with small repairs because he is a nice guy. Not much was required to put the room together. The sturdy industrial door had been there for many decades, as was the bookcase that obscured it, but the door was laborious to open. Some six months ago, after the onset of a plague of sleepless nights following the death of her husband, she asked Ibrahim for advice; he offered to bolt the bookcase to the door, grease the hinges, and add a heavy-duty electric gizmo to make it open more easily.

It was \$790 well spent. Now the shelter gives her solace and makes her think she has a plan, like the emergency food and water she keeps in the attic at home. She goes up there from time to time, carefully navigating the narrow stairs from the hallway outside her bedroom, just to check, to be sure it's all still there, the five cases of ramen she picked up at Costco, the five gallons of water. She's had these rations

since 9/11, however, and she keeps forgetting that it's surely time to refresh.

But right now, this is where she needs to be—here, in this small apartment in Northern Virginia that is crammed full of her employees, most of them young enough to be her kids. Jamal, the store manager, is throwing a party to say goodbye to his colleagues. He is off to study law at the University of Chicago, his first-choice school. Sophie is happy for him. Thrilled. Proud. But she is also bereft; she can't imagine running the store without him.

A vile yellow liquid is being passed around the room, and she watches them drink it on a dare. Apparently it's a Chicago thing, this Malört, and it tastes so horrific that it's been called the most disgusting liquor of all time. Someone has, for better or worse, managed to find a bottle of it in DC.

Sophie watches a young woman with short, spiky peroxidized hair tilt back her head and pour the syrupy yellow liquid into her mouth. She then gasps and chokes and spits it onto the floor. "Blech!" she says. "This is horrible! It tastes like . . . suffering." She grabs at her throat theatrically.

Sophie is having trouble retrieving her name, but she does remember that she fired this young woman a couple of weeks ago, which was a rare and upsetting event. But after a week of hand-wringing and long discussions with Jamal, they agreed that she needed to be let go on account of a belligerent episode with a customer. Sophie wonders why she is even here, at this party.

Ought she be worried that she can't remember her name? Perhaps she is having a deliberate mental block on account of wishing away the entire bad episode. But who

knows; she's owned the bookstore for more than twenty years. Even though she has been grateful to, and frankly even adored, pretty much every one of her employees, and even though she keeps in touch with many of them, by now at least a few of the short-termers have morphed into a pastiche of brainy English majors, most of whom eventually moved on to more lucrative careers.

But this woman, Sophie ought to remember her name. In addition to being rude to customers, she fancied herself some sort of oracle, issuing disturbing and unsolicited prophecies to colleagues and strangers alike.

"Your stars are about to scramble, rearranging your perception of reality forever," she had whispered, unsolicited, in Sophie's ear one day last fall. A week later, Sophie's husband of twenty-five years, Solomon, was dead. It's not as though this young woman was responsible, and yet . . . well, maybe she *was* in some weird, cosmic woo-woo way. The episode had felt strangely violating, even before the prediction proved true.

Now the former employee—*What is her name?*—grimaces on account of the liquid suffering; she has just taken another deep swig from the bottle. Yellow syrup dribbles down her chin. Sophie fights the urge to reach over and touch the young woman's hair with the palm of her hand just to feel the bristle, to see if it has the same scratchy texture as her late husband's beard.

"Oh, great stuff!" says Noah, taking a sip from the bottle. "Exxon Supreme—high-octane . . . or wait, wait . . ." He takes another sip. "Hmm, I detect a hint of Shell, with a subtle note of isoctane."

Sophie is reassured by her ability to confidently identify this young man. She remembers interviewing Noah when he applied for a job as an entry-level bookseller a year ago, and she has watched with amusement his transformation from a preppy Princeton grad who bragged about his acceptance into one of the eating clubs to, within a week at the store, a skinny, bookish hipster with a fashion style more longshoreman than Ivy Club.

“It tastes like Lady Macbeth’s tears,” says Clemi, an aspiring novelist whose dramatic red hair spills in ringlets to her waist. Sophie has a soft spot for this kid and has recently given her a promotion.

She hired Clemi straight out of college too. At least half of her employees aspire to become writers, and while most of them will either give up or become worn down by the process, she gets the sense that Clemi might succeed—and not just because her mother is a famous literary agent. She told Sophie she gets up early every morning to write before coming into work, and she has ripped up and begun again multiple drafts. She also seems to revere books—of course, everyone working at a bookstore loves books—but for Clemi, the book love is extreme. It appears to cause her pain when her colleagues disparage a breezy bestseller, or when someone remarks that an author was boring when he spoke in a monotone at an event and should work on improving his act.

“Authors are writers, not trained seals!” Sophie once heard her say.

There is another reason she is partial to Clemi; she reminds Sophie of herself at that age. She, too, was intense

and serious and fiercely literary, always talking about and even defending books as if they were kids being bullied on the playground. She took it personally when someone in her seventh-grade classroom raised her hand and delivered a diatribe against *The Catcher in the Rye*, even though Sophie hadn't liked the book much herself.

There is—or was—a physical resemblance too. As a kid Sophie had wild long hair, although it was a darker shade of red than Clemi's. Granted, the rest of the physical resemblance is mostly wishful thinking. She was never quite that thin, or that pretty, or that tall. Only five foot two, Sophie is what you might call stout. She has grown a touch heavier around the hips with each passing year, and she has not been exercising much on account of sometimes excruciating pain in her left shoulder. It seems this is nothing other than an occupational hazard of owning a bookstore and lifting too many boxes. She's only fifty-four, for the love of God. She's too young to have buried a husband or to have a body that is falling apart.

Clemi is now in charge of scheduling and executing of all of the store's events, and Sophie has to admit that she does a good job. Possibly even very good. To do a *perfect* job, she'd have to be able to read Sophie's mind, and honestly, Sophie can't even follow her own thoughts these days. She thinks one thing and then second-guesses herself and then a third thought extinguishes its predecessor and she can't remember the original point of the entire thinking episode. There's nothing wrong with her; she is simply addled, and for perfectly good reason. In addition to her personal

and professional challenges, which include having recently become widowed, it feels as though the world is in flames.

To wit, she can't believe she has allowed her son, Michael, to talk her into coming here. It was her fault for mentioning the party when he stopped by the house earlier this morning to pick up some laundry Sophie had agreed to wash. Back when Solomon was alive, there would have been little expectation for her to show up at staff parties. Now that she's alone, she's supposed to stay up late and hoist this Malört stuff and drink craft beer?

Besides, it feels somewhat sacrilegious to be out partying on this particular day, when she's been glued to CNN for hours watching the news, horrified and sickened by the bigotry and hatred and rage. "In the name of the commonwealth, you are being commanded to immediately disperse," police officers in riot gear shouted over and over and over in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Things had already become violent last night, when white supremacists gathered on the University of Virginia campus to protest the removal of a Robert E. Lee statue. But then, this morning, it escalated further when a car driven by a white supremacist plowed into a crowd of anti-racist protesters, killing a thirty-two-year-old woman and injuring dozens of others. It was too soon to say how many exactly.

Sophie forced herself to watch, to bear witness, as bystanders stumbled around giving interviews, some of them bloodied and disoriented.

She can still hear the screams. And she can still hear the chants.

"Jews will not replace us."

“Sieg heil.” The Nazi salute.

This is a momentously bad day, one she thinks will go down in history like the 1970 shootings of unarmed college students at Kent State. It seems wrong to be out at a party. But as he’d stuffed the contents of the dryer into a duffel bag, Michael had argued, “As horrible as this is, Mom, you’re just letting them win if you become a shut-in! You need to set an intention to live.”

Who is this once-cynical child who now speaks in platitudes? Could it really be her son, who graduated summa cum laude from college this spring and is currently unemployed? He is building on his liberal arts degree by studying to become a yoga instructor, he says. She would like to go on record as a mother who is supportive, who harbors no particular anti-yogic sentiments, but who nonetheless hopes to see her son earn a living—enough to pay rent in a building with a washer and dryer, or at least within walking distance of a laundromat. She has trouble getting her mind around his latest endeavor. She has never seen him wear sneakers, take a walk, go for a run, or get on a bike, and now he wakes up one morning suddenly transformed into a proselytizing yogi?

She knows Michael has a point, but she has a counterpoint: Even on a good day, she doesn’t belong at this party. The staff always invite her to their get-togethers, but she knows this is mostly out of politeness and obligation. It’s not as if they necessarily expect or want her to come!

Her mistake had been to share with Michael her dismay about the forthcoming loss of Jamal to the legal profession. Jamal is her rock, the one she turns to first when she needs

a second opinion. But who can blame him for wanting more professionally? Both of his parents are prominent attorneys, as is his sister, who is a federal judge. He has been contemplating law school for nearly twenty years. Even as the store's highest-paid employee, he lives in a cramped apartment with his husband and three-year-old twins. With shelves of floor-to-ceiling books, the place exudes warmth. On the walls hang poster-size book covers for various contemporary novels that were sent by publishers and are no longer needed at the store, including one for *Unaccustomed Earth* that's been signed with a Sharpie by Jhumpa Lahiri.

"You *have* to go to the party," Michael had continued. "It's important for you to show you care."

"Of course they know I care! I'm their boss. That doesn't mean I have to cross some bridge to godforsaken Virginia and drive on roads named for Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, who started his whole thing! I'm at the store every day. I'm *fully* engaged!"

She knows she was protesting too much and that she was doing so for a classic reason: The opposite is true. She is physically present at the store, but increasingly less absorbed. She is tired. She is burning out. And as yesterday's mortifying incident with Zhang Li possibly indicates, she is even starting to become hostile to the books. Zhang is young and relatively new at her job, and Sophie probably scared her half to death.

Sophie may, herself, prefer fat historical tomes and literary fiction, but she's a book lover as well as a shrewd businesswoman, and she gets that the books with women's perfectly pedicured feet on the covers pay the bills. These

and the book products penned by the celebrity chefs and the self-help gurus and the rock stars and the former and would-be presidents and the football players whose devoted fans show up at the crack of dawn and stand in line for hours to get a signed book and a selfie with the author. A bookstore—and its owner!—must embrace all things book, from the intellectually transcendent to bestsellers about how to declutter homes. This is why she opened the store in the first place, so let the trucks haul in all the books, and let the booksellers read them and staff-pick them and hand-sell them, every last one. Just please don't draw any deep meaning from the fact that this bookstore owner is a little bit sick of books.



What really set her off, for the record, had less to do with those stupid airbrushed feet on the galley than a question Zhang had posed:

“Would you like to up your order of *The Girl in Gauzy Blue*?” she’d asked. “I see you’ve only preordered twenty-four hundred.”

The Girl in Gauzy Blue is the literary debut of a twenty-five-year-old Parisian-born Afghani-Irish woman. It’s a multigenerational doorstopper of a novel about love and war and identity that has been described as “breathtaking,” as “daringly precocious,” as “epically transfiguring.” Positioned to be a bestseller, it comes out next week. It’s the sort of novel that even a year ago Sophie would have lapped up, would have asked for as many more copies as Zhang Li could

spare. She might have possibly even written the staff pick herself.

But Sophie is burnt out. She has trouble understanding how anyone can really care about this kind of precious literary fiction at this juncture in history.

The Zhang incident was a perfect storm—*The Girl in Gauzy Blue*, the galley with the feet, Jamal’s impending move to Chicago—it was an atmospheric disturbance, that’s all. Like moist air and cool air converging along with vapors or whatever it is that causes hurricanes to form.

If her son has no interest in taking over—a highly likely scenario, it seems—could it finally be time to give up the bookstore with its endless demands and small-business headaches? The question is not entirely an abstraction. The Pittsburgh-based developer who recently purchased the parking lot behind the store, Ed someone or other, has been trying to reach her for the last couple of weeks to discuss some sort of proposal. She has her suspicions about what that proposal might be, but she’s been avoiding his calls.

One thing’s for sure: She is not going to tell Michael that there are two other parties she’s been invited to. Next Monday, a bunch of her employees are gathering on someone’s rooftop to watch the solar eclipse—in the middle of the workday, no less! And the following evening, there’s a costume thing: “Come dressed as your favorite superhero,” the invitation reads. As if she could or would force herself to dress up as a superhero! The thought makes her want to crawl inside her nook.



It's an accident, her nook. Or really a tangle of escalating confusion and miscommunication from when she and Solomon first purchased the property in 1997. The store was previously a bank. Or, rather, half a bank. The plat was carved into two pieces, and the purchasers of the adjacent property turned their portion into what had, for a time, been an overpriced steak house called, rather uncreatively, the Bank. They turned a cost-cutting measure into an architectural gimmick, keeping most of the industrial bits as well as the furniture, and the entrées were all bank-themed: The Money Market, for instance, was their premier steak dinner—an eleven-ounce fillet, a baked potato, and your choice of fresh vegetable. The Treasury STRIPS was, unsurprisingly, a sixteen-ounce New York prime cut. It was the wrong restaurant at the wrong time in the wrong place; this was a bookstore-and-coffeehouse kind of neighborhood—expensive red-meat joint, not so much. The restaurant collapsed after being panned in a *Washington Post* review. “Don’t put your money in this bank,” was the kicker and the epitaph. Restaurants are, of course, famously hard to maintain, but this location seemed especially cursed. Over the years it had been a California nouvelle spot serving organic cuisine, a Chinese restaurant, an Indian dhaba, and now, as of two weeks ago, a coffee shop called Verb, from which Zhang had procured the ill-fated skim cappuccino.

Back when the lawyers split the bank in two, the bookstore had been granted a 350-square-foot space with a half bath that jutted awkwardly across the boundaries. It had been the bank manager’s office, and the plan had been to use the guts of it for Sophie’s office. But then, after the closing,

after the construction began, the Bank's lawyers objected and filed a motion claiming the division of the properties had been unfair and based on inadequate information that failed to take into account an easement in the back alley that prohibited the Bank from building an addition. Finalizing of the deed was held up for years, and meantime both properties went ahead with their construction, and the disputed territory was walled off.

In a town full of lawyers, it's hard to believe a legal matter simply evaporated, just went away on its own, but after the Bank was foreclosed on and resold, the matter essentially disappeared. It's now been twenty-two years; the space next door has changed hands seven times, the lawyers have all moved on to other firms, retired, died, or, in one case, been disbarred.

Sophie's husband, Solomon—a lawyer himself—suffered his fatal heart attack last year. His synagogue book group had drifted off the topic of Thomas L. Friedman's *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* and was instead discussing the constitutionality of requiring immigrants, with the clear goal of targeting Muslims, to sign a registry. Or so she'd been told; Sophie had been at the store that night, hosting an event. This was a topic about which Solomon was particularly incensed. He announced he would register as a Muslim should that dark day come to pass, and he was midsentence, making a point that had to do with Anne Frank's father, Otto, when he clutched at his chest and dropped to the floor. This was not the way he would have wanted to go, because Solomon always completed his points; you could count on that like a cock's crow.

Since his death, Sophie has been haunted by the specter of Anne Frank and has read and reread her diary, wondering what, exactly, Solomon had been trying to say. She's still not sure, but the reminder of Anne's family hiding in an annex behind a wall of books is of course what inspired Sophie to reinvestigate the store's nook. With her husband gone, she and Ibrahim are possibly the only people left in Washington who know this place exists. It's every person's fantasy. A room of one's own, a place only they know how to access, in the most James Bond of ways.



Earlier this year, just before consulting Ibrahim about the door, she had visited the nook for the first time in more than a decade. After the End of Day Report arrived in her inbox—an indication that the doors were about to be locked and the store would be empty—she had driven there at 11:00 p.m. She had been nervous entering alone so late at night. Disarming the alarm system always made her anxious; she entertained visions of setting it off by mistake and then panicking, not being able to remember the code word—was it the name of their first pet bird or their second?—and being hauled off in handcuffs. She knew she should have more confidence: Any idiot could punch in an alarm code, and indeed that evening she managed to enter without incident. She then turned on just enough light to go about her business, which involved finding the small stepladder, climbing to the top shelf in the back of the Fiction room, and removing a face-out stack of *The Quiet American* (Penguin Classics

Deluxe Edition), three copies of the mass market paperback edition (She would have to talk to Antonio, the senior buyer, about that . . . Did they really need to carry two different versions of the same book?), two copies of *The End of the Affair*, one copy of *The Third Man*, and three copies of Greene's collected short stories. Then, using a flashlight, she located the nearly invisible indentation in the corner of the shelf and punched the tiny bull's-eye with the tip of a pen, which caused the latch to release, enabling her to push the shelf open manually, albeit with great difficulty; she had to lean on it with all of her weight. And there it was, still. A tiny, private mecca. A tiny, private, and very, very dusty mecca. One dim overhead light revealed 350 square feet of windowless, dusty solitude. It was even more perfect than she'd remembered, because one thing she had completely forgotten was that she and Solomon had stored a couple of sticks of old furniture in there, including a futon.

The place is much improved now, but it still needs a thorough cleaning and a touch of home—bed linens, some cheery knickknacks, family photographs. Also, a hot plate. Maybe she can even squeeze in a small fridge.

One problem she recently noticed when she tried to plug in her kettle is that the electrical outlets don't work. She will have to figure this out before she can properly begin to inhabit the place, and now, after watching the bodies being carried away on stretchers and seeing those neo-Nazis spewing racist and anti-Semitic dreck, carrying their torches, waving their flags, and chanting their slogans, *Sieg heil*, she will need to accelerate the timeline. She already has flashlights and batteries, and the opening and closing of the

door has been much improved by Ibrahim, but now she will need to consult him about making a few additional tweaks.

Is this weird? Probably not. She spent many a Sunday morning as a kid watching grainy filmstrips of Jews being transported to concentration camps, shoved like cattle onto packed trains, and she grew up on a diet of Holocaust literature. It was impossible to grow up Jewish in this world and not have events like those in Charlottesville add to the traumatic inherited memories that already keep you up at night.

Nazis or no Nazis, isn't it some people's ideal to live inside a bookstore? Certainly, it's not unheard of: Shakespeare and Company in Paris famously has an apartment inside the store. And she recently read a sweet novel, *The Storied Life of A. J. Fikry*, in which the owner lived inside the bookstore. Building a cocoon that is in the heart of all these books feels to Sophie the most natural instinct in the world. She has read any number of articles about people scaling down, paring their possessions, moving into tiny spaces, even into tiny houses. It's a trend. Hey, it's even a book!

Does she really see herself moving in here, going into hiding? Maybe yes and maybe no. But it makes her feel better to have a plan, especially given what she watched unfold on television today. Even before today she felt the daily deluge of alarming news to do with Russian hackers, nuclear-armed North Koreans, police officers shooting innocent Black children, deranged gunmen popping up like whack-a-moles ambushing schools and holiday parties and church gatherings, people being violently hauled off airplanes, terrorists in Barcelona, melting ice caps, and dying polar bears, and she is on alert, and terrified, about absolutely everything.

Really, if you add it all up, this inclination to nest is an entirely rational response to this moment in time. And she, Sophie Bernstein, is of sound mind and body, as evidenced by the fact that she is here at this party, where around and around the room, a bottle of noxious liquor continues to move.



Live in the moment! Be present! These are things people say nowadays—especially her soon-to-be-a-yoga-teacher son—and she will try, because here she is at a party in a high-rise apartment on Lee Highway, in an indeterminate suburb of Northern Virginia. The bristly-haired young woman is demanding that the bottle make its way back to her, and when it finally does, she holds it over her open mouth and pours the yellow liquid in a steady stream.

“Stop it!” Clemi yells, approaching her and grabbing the bottle. They wrestle for a moment until it falls to the floor, spilling on the rug. The bristly-haired woman dives for it and falls, and a few people gather around to help her stand back up. Sophie sees Clemi take her by the arm and walk with her out the door.

This is extremely disturbing to watch. Sophie thinks she should leave before things get even further out of hand. The room is overheated, there is too much alcohol, and it is packed with guests—what Sally Quinn back in the day called a Rat F@#k. (Sophie had been to one of these in the early nineties, when Ben and Sally threw a book party for a mutual friend, and she’d vowed to never return, even if

invited.) But this party has only just begun, and there is no way to slip out undetected. She sees Jamal in the back of the room, standing near the door, guardedly watching; his husband, Lewis, is beside him, and on his face is a look of concern. They had clearly not anticipated this mayhem. Sophie wants to talk to them both before she leaves. She decides to give it ten more minutes. She finds her way into the kitchen to get a glass of water and winds up talking to Antonio, the senior book buyer, about his favorite summer reads for longer than expected, until they are both summoned back into the living room.

A shot. A superlative. A grimace. A shot. An even more colorful superlative.

Someone rushing to the bathroom, about to be sick. And suddenly, a chant:

“Mis . . . ses . . . Bern . . . stein. Mis . . . ses . . . Bern . . . stein.”

Some thirty pairs of young eyes look in her direction, and in them she thinks she sees a mix of bemusement and affection, as well as a little fear, as if maybe she’s about to hurl a book at them.

They continue to chant her name like she’s just one of the crowd. Sophie Bernstein—mother, bookstore owner, fifty-four-year-old widow—is being invited to pick up the bottle and throw back a swig.

“Mis . . . ses . . . Bern . . . stein. Mis . . . ses . . . Bern . . . stein. Mis . . . ses . . . Bern . . . stein. Mis . . . ses . . . Bern . . . stein.”

Now they are gathered around her. She wishes they would call her Sophie, but she suspects that even her

contemporaries retreat to the comfort of calling her Mrs. Bernstein behind her back. This is part of the curse of being Sophie Bernstein; she is more formidable than she wishes to be.

She thinks of the Frank family, right before they went into hiding: “Just enjoy your carefree life while you can,” Otto had told his daughter.

“Pass me the bottle!” Sophie says. The room quiets. The bottle makes its way to her. She stares at it a moment, then puts it to her lips and tilts her head back. As the liquid burns the back of her mouth she envisions a vat of turpentine and rotting yellow grapefruit and, yes, maybe even a hint of petroleum. Her throat ignites, her esophagus is engulfed. It’s vile to the *n*th degree, sure, but it doesn’t taste like any form of suffering Sophie has encountered in her life—at least not yet.

“It tastes like . . . napalm.”

Someone hoots. She holds tight to the bottle, then takes another swig.

“Oh, great leader, give us your words of wisdom,” Noah says, “now that you have drunk from the font.”

This is a little much, she thinks, but it’s true; she is feeling weirdly visionary.

A new chant begins: “More, more, more.” She doesn’t know whether they are suggesting she drink more or speak more, so she does a bit of both. Something strange is happening. She is losing her bearings a little, but whether it’s because of the vile yellow liquid, the overheated room, the late hour, or all of the above—she has no idea.

“It tastes like dark times,” she says, taking one more swig. “Dark times ahead. The darkness will soon descend.”

END OF DAY REPORT: Sunday, August 13

OPENING SHIFT: Emma, Jamal, Noah

SWING SHIFT: Carmen, Antonio, Aaron

CLOSING SHIFT: Summer, Yash, Sami

EVENT: Clemi

FLOOR MANAGER COMMENTS: Friends! It's my first EOD report as store manager! Jamal is still with us in body and (perhaps) spirit for another week, but I'm taking this over as of today, so be gentle with me!

- Stop by the information desk and introduce yourself to Summer! She comes to us by way of NASA, where she worked as a contract specialist for five years, before which she had a stint at Barnes & Noble.
- Belinda, from web orders, is not in today. She hasn't responded to my texts or calls. If you've been in touch with her, please let me know.
- We've had several calls about *The Doodles*, a self-published memoir by a dog breeder in Maine who has come up with a bunch of weird doodle varieties, including a Micro Bernedoodle named Bernie who appeared with the author on *Weekend TODAY* this morning and who indeed looks a lot like the junior senator from the great state of Vermont. We do not carry this book, but Antonio is investigating whether we can get some copies on consignment since it clearly appeals to our doodle-crazed customers.
- Speaking of animals: We've had a ton of calls about the *Kuddly Killers* event on Saturday. Not sure what that's about.
- Ditto for seriously unhappy callers re: Raymond Chaucer, also appearing this weekend. Sample outtake: "How can you

invite that misogynist wife-killing so-called poet to speak at your store?” Direct all relevant questions to Clemi.

And if that isn’t exciting enough for you:

- We briefly lost internet midday.
- We ran out of books at the event yesterday evening.
- The vacuum cleaner isn’t working properly, but never fear, Noah is on the case! Report from the battlefield: “I’m not sure what’s going on. It stopped sucking up dirt. It seems like a little piece of plastic might have gotten stuck in the hose but I dislodged it with a coat hanger. It’s totally under control.”

IMPORTANT UPDATE: My Solar Eclipse Party next Monday is shaping up as a must for your social calendar. Stop by and watch from my rooftop. And just a reminder about Sami’s Super(S)Hero Party at 9:00 p.m. the following night. Everyone welcome—spouses, significant others, doodles—but you *must* come in costume.

Autumn T