

PROLOGUE

UNLIKELY AND INEXPLICABLE

If you look into the camera and you see something you recognize, don't click the shutter.

Yasuhiro Wakabayashi, Photographer

DEAR READER: YOU SHOULD KNOW up front with whom you'll be spending the next few hundred pages exploring the nature of unlikely and inexplicable events and how they affect our lives. Adrian Lomachenko here, to whom unlikely and inexplicable events have occurred with such frequency they have come to be expected. I sometimes spend days on end doing nothing but waiting for something strange to happen. I am rarely disappointed.

The first such event occurred to my five-year-old self. I was sleeping alone in my own bed in my own bedroom for the first time, having spent the entirety of my young life in the same bedroom as my parents. They had tucked me in and said goodnight. You'll be fine, they assured me but I was not convinced. Alone with my stuffed monkey, Miranda, I closed my eyes against the writhing water stains on the disintegrating wallpaper and my ears against the tiny voices that came from behind

the closet door. I chewed on my monkey's left ear, having long since chewed off the right. When I opened my eyes, the room was bathed in soft blue light. A man sat on the edge of my bed. He looked at me and smiled. I felt safe in his presence.

Hello, he said.

Hello, I said.

What's your name? he said.

Adrian, I said.

That's a very nice name, Adrian, he said.

What's your name? I said.

I'm Adrian, too, he said. We have the same name.

My young mind was perplexed. How could there be two Adrians?

What's your monkey's name? the man said.

Miranda, I said.

Miranda! Very nice! Why did you name her Miranda, Adrian?

She told me her name.

Did she now!

He looked around the room.

So...this is your room, huh?

Yes.

It's a very nice room, Adrian. You're a lucky boy. You'll be happy here, you and Miranda. You should sleep now.

I closed my eyes. He touched my face with his fingers. I fell fast asleep. Twenty years later, I had a dream. I sat on the edge of a small bed in a small room bathed in soft blue light. In the bed was a child holding a stuffed monkey. He was afraid to sleep alone and I reassured

him. When I woke up, I remembered the conversation in my dream, and I remembered the incident from my childhood, and I realized they were one and the same.

I WAS BORN AND RAISED in Chicken Ranch, Arkansas, where scarcity was the rule: little money; not much to think about; nothing to do. I was bussed to a high school that served the lower quarter of our rural county and I graduated at the top of my class of thirteen. That and my ACT scores and my documented state of poverty were sufficient to grant me a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley, which probably satisfied their quota for applicants from Chicken Ranch, Arkansas.

While my peers spent their lazy Arkansas days catching catfish in the Buffalo River, I read books and painted pictures. My taste in literature ran to the Southern writers: Faulkner, Penn Warren, O'Conner, Lee; the science fiction masters: Asimov, Heinlein, Bradbury, Simak; the magical realists for their playful spinning of reality: Marquez, Allende, Murakami, Foos. With my brush and palette I mimicked the fabulous imagery of the Surrealists. You might think, with my predilection for prose and paint, I would have majored in literature or fine art but, no, my soul was torn by two opposing forces: creativity and greed. I wanted *money*. I would fashion a life of middle-class comfort and privilege, and erase the memory of an impoverished childhood.

So I majored in finance.

I graduated Magna Cum Laud from Berkeley and landed a position at the headquarters of a major bank in the Financial District of San

Francisco. I had an office with a view on California Street, my own parking space (a prized piece of real estate in San Francisco), wore a tailored suit, and carried a briefcase crammed with other people's important documents. I had a girlfriend who studied Real Estate Law and wanted us to become wealthy together... and I was miserable. The restless, demanding forces of creativity, long repressed, rose up to challenge the cynical forces of acquisition and greed, and I was torn between them. Here I was in the West Coast literary Mecca of the world—and I wore a suit!

SOME EVENTS ARE SO UNLIKELY AND INEXPLICABLE your life does an about-face and you go to where you were truly bound. I skipped the morning meeting at the office and took Uber to City Lights Books in North Beach. When I die, friend, spread my ashes down its labyrinthine aisles. I wandered them for an hour and, such was my habit, filled my basket with more books than I would find time to read. I would be missed at the office but didn't care.

I stood on the corner of Broadway and Columbus Avenue awaiting my ride back to the Financial District. At my side stood a tall man in a yellow silk shirt with puffed sleeves over baggy crimson trousers tied at the ankles. His long black hair was parted in the middle. Golden hoops hung from his ears. He carried an umbrella though there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The white flashing pedestrian sign cycled through twice but he didn't cross. He turned and looked down upon me from his height. His eyes were dark pools with points of light at their centers, like the light at the end of a tunnel. A cunning smile curled his lips.

Good morning, Brother, he said.

His voice was resonant, seeming to come from far away after a long journey.

Same to you, friend, I said.

I felt an inexplicable kinship with the man. His eccentric appearance so contrasted with mine that I was sorely reminded of the sacrifice of personal freedom that the pursuit of material gain demanded.

How is your day? he inquired.

There are things I'd rather be doing, I confessed.

He nodded shrewdly.

Don't wait too long, he said. Tomorrow never comes.

With that, he turned and stepped off the curb into the path of a cable car. He somersaulted through the air like a red and yellow bean bag and was impaled on the iron foot peg of a telephone pole. His arms hung limply at his sides. One hand yet held his umbrella. Before he closed his eyes, he winked and smiled his canny smile at me. I swear he did.

I QUIT THE BANK AND TOOK a part-time job at an oyster bar. I parted with my girlfriend. She would not have liked what I became. I wore what I felt like wearing, and let my hair grow. I was accepted into the MFA Program in Creative Writing at San Francisco State University. I would come away saddled with a mountain of student loan debt like a million other aspiring intellectuals but that's the price one pays for higher education in the U.S.A. I became intimate with the nooks and crannies of San Francisco and spent two years in pursuit of my degree making up stories about its various and sundry characters, a few of which found

print in literary journals, the collection of which became my thesis, and was later published as *Baghdad by the Bay Again*, after Herb Caen's far better collection of essays, *Baghdad by the Bay*, written thirty years before I was born. My humble version was well-received but a good review and four dollars will get you a medium mocha at Starbucks. My true reward is that a copy can still be found on a shelf of City Lights Books.

On the strength of its publication, and my MFA from San Francisco State, I was invited to interview for a teaching position at Rogue Community College in Medford, Oregon. My drive north was filled with apprehension. What if they hired me? Why ever would I leave San Francisco, the literary Mecca of the Western World, to live in the hinterlands of Southern Oregon?

THE FOLKS AT ROGUE COMMUNITY COLLEGE liked my Southern roots. They liked my modest publication history. They liked the circuitous route by which I'd arrived at their doorstep. They offered me the position. I accepted. My modest salary would cover my student loan payment, rent on a room in town, and put food on the table. But Southern Oregon?

Argh! What had I done?

Returning to San Francisco in a dubious state of mind, I stopped in the quaint historic town of Jacksonville for lunch. The instant my feet hit the ground I felt a certain energy suffuse upward through the soles of my shoes. A salutation. An invitation. I did a walking tour of the town. Not a traffic light nor parking meter in sight, only old brick and ivy and

smiling people being led about by their dogs. I visited its festival grounds, its galleries, its eclectic shops, its bookstore, *Rebel Heart Books*, its well-tended cemetery. I sat at the Good Bean Café and Coffee House and marveled at the diversity of its patrons: young and old reading novels, reading the bible, playing chess, typing at their laptops, and having lively conversations. I perused its bulletin board, replete with flyers advertising theatre and music and holistic health. I read the engaging columns in *The Jacksonville Review*. Clearly, this was not your typical, well-preserved historic Western town of a few thousand people. There was artistry and intelligence and entrepreneurship in the very air. More creative types *per capita* than even in San Francisco.

What do you think, Miranda? I thought. Have we arrived?

SOMETIMES AN OTHERWISE INCONSEQUENTIAL event can trigger a revelation. I wrapped up my business in San Francisco and headed north to Oregon. I took the slow coastal route, a leisurely passage into my new life. I rolled down the window and let the salty air wash over me. I reveled in the blue sky, the ribbon of surf, the pavement unscrolling beneath my wheels, and contemplated my next book. My teaching load would be light and I would have plenty of time to write. But about what?

In Ft. Bragg, 170 miles north of San Francisco, I took a room at the Noyo Harbor Inn, an extravagance given my dwindling funds, but I was in the mood to celebrate the turn of events my life had taken. I dined on the patio of the Harborview Bistro & Bar. Lights twinkled on the lapping water like distant stars, and the masts of small craft rocked to and fro

like metronomes in slow motion. After dinner, I lingered over a crisp Chardonnay and Haruki Murakami's short story collection *Blind Willow, Sleeping Woman*. I was midway through the story *Chance Traveler*, which examines the nature of coincidence, when the woman at the next table over approached with a timid smile.

Excuse me, she said. May I ask what you're reading?

I held up the book. She read the cover.

What's it about, she said.

It's a work of *magical realism*, I said.

When she failed to respond, I added: A genre of fiction wherein fantastic occurrences are treated as normal.

Oh, she stammered, thank you.

She returned to her table, seeming embarrassed by her boldness or else by her faltering response. I resumed reading *Chance Traveler* where I'd left off. In the very next paragraph, the protagonist sits in a restaurant reading a book. The woman at the adjacent table approaches him—and asks what he's reading!

It came to me in a flash: my next book would explore the occurrence of unlikely and inexplicable events and how they affect our lives. I would sit at the Good Bean Café in Jacksonville, observe its patrons, engage in conversation, and with a little help from Miranda devise a story, real or imagined, around a watershed moment in the lives of each of twelve characters, one for each month of the year. The challenge would be to finish each story in the month in which it was begun. I would call my book *My Year at the Good Bean Café*. I would write the first word in January of the new year.

A BIT ABOUT MIRANDA: SHE CEASED BEING a stuffed monkey when I ceased being a timid child in Chicken Ranch Arkansas. Thereafter, she was merely a cherished recollection of a childhood companion, and though I had no illusions she was anything else, I would sometimes appeal to her for inspiration when my writing faltered. But she became more than a memory the night I spent on a houseboat moored off the coast of Sausalito, Marin County, California.

Earlier that day I'd bought a hit of acid off a street dealer on Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley outside a Tibetan Curio Shop where I'd purchased a pendant, seven charms on a chain, thought to stimulate mystical insight. I dropped the acid in the evening when alone on the boat I was tending for a friend out of town. I fingered the pendant as I sat on the deck in a rocking chair watching the sun go down, and the seagulls dip and soar over white-capped waves on the bay, and across the bay the lights of the San Francisco Skyline as they blinked on silently and twinkled like fairy dust. As the acid took hold of me I became obsessed with the number seven. I saw a group of seagulls cavorting in the salty air off the bow of the boat and there were seven of them. I saw a cluster of sailboats make their way in the rough waters from Alcatraz to the Embarcadero and there were seven of them, too. Even the cottony moan of a foghorn emanating from the roiling sea smoke beyond the Golden Gate Bridge sounded in groups of seven. There was something mysterious going on and I was seized by the notion that I should capture its meaning in a poem of seven lines. But as I sat at the typewriter on the desk in the main room of the boat that served as study, parlor and

boudoir, my fingers poised on the keyboard in rapt anticipation of cosmic revelation...nothing happened; the doors of perception had slammed shut rudely in my face.

I went out to the deck and searched the sky, where the stars had arranged themselves neatly into clusters of seven.

Miranda! I called out. Miranda! I need you!

My supplication was met by silence. I called again and again until I had called out seven times, then I heard a voice behind me.

I'm here.

I turned, and there in the dark interior of the boat, glowing softly like a Luna Moth in moonlight, stood Miranda.

Come closer, she said.

Her voice was soft and sweet. I seemed to float across the distance between us. She put a hand on my arm. I put a hand on hers. She was real, alright, ephemeral as a fairy, yet her fleshly presence no less corporeal than that of any woman I had been with, and the comeliness of her carriage no less alluring than that of any nymph conjured by the lurid imagination of the artist Botticelli.

Miranda!

Her eyes were like nothing I had seen before: portals onto an imponderable swirling cosmos. I would have left my wife and children for her if I had had them to leave.

Your need is very great, she said: a poem of seven lines that unlocks the secrets of the Universe!

I put my hands on her hips. I stroked her willowy torso.

My need is great indeed, I said, but not for lines of poetry.

When dawn broke over the bay I was alone. I untangled myself from the twisted blankets and the sweaty sheets and went to the deck of the boat. Off the bow, five seagulls dipped and soared in the salty air. A trio of sailboats leaned their sheets into the wind. A foghorn sounded twice. If Miranda had bestowed the secrets of the Universe upon me that night they were lost to me now but I would never forget the pleasure of carnal knowledge raised to the level of rapture by a stuffed monkey morphed into my muse and mystic paramour.

OH, AND ONE MORE THING: We'll dispense with the *Dear Reader* device. Your name is Sam. I need to feel I'm addressing a real person, not a mass of anonymous readers *out there* somewhere. I hope you don't mind. I promise you won't lose your identity by sharing it with others. You'll remain a unique individual, just like everyone else. Besides, it's only for a year.

Well. It's you and me and Miranda, Sam. Can we do this?