NOCTURNES IN BLUE

A CREATIVE PROJECT

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2017
Critical Introduction

My goal for this novel is to produce a work of art that emphasize the importance of empathy. When I first submitted my portfolio to Ball State to be considered for graduate school, I said that I wanted to write things that made readers consider other points of view, and it is my hope that I have done so with this excerpt from a longer project, which I am calling Nocturnes in Blue. The novel gives readers two vehicles for empathy in its protagonists, Fiona and Felix, who struggle to make ends meet in a New York City that is strange to both them as characters and us as readers. For them, New York City is exiting the era of Prohibition and the Roaring Twenties; the Great Depression and the Second World War loom large in the coming decades. For us, we see a New York City where improvisational jazz music offers the same amount of energy as internal combustion engines, which means their society is undergoing drastic social changes that didn’t take place in our world until decades later. It is my hope that these two characters will face emotional conflicts that make them universally relatable to readers while, paradoxically, putting them in situations it will have been impossible to experience. This is why I chose New York, the most populous city in the nation, and this is why I added a fantastic element to the plot. I want the reader to want to exercise empathy, and I want it to be a little harder than usual to do so.

In order to make the reader want to be empathetic, I needed to make Felix and Fiona be people who are optimistic in spite of the deep wounds they’ve suffered as a result of the society around them. It was also important for me to make these two characters grow enough to recognize some of the wounded individuals in their midst who are all too often ostracized. For this reason, my characters run into members of minority racial groups, LGBTQ individuals, and adherents to traditionally oppressed faiths as the plot to Nocturnes in Blue progresses. Fiona
encounters sex trafficking, segregation, the stigma against those with mental illness, and labor exploitation. Felix, her cousin, encounters anti-Semitism when working with a Jewish private investigator, and discovers how misogynistic society can be after he impregnates his girlfriend and her father demands she get an abortion.

All of this is dramatic. It’s set in a world that is different from our own. To bridge some of this narratological gap, the novel employs an omniscient narrator with a penchant for directly addressing the reader. In drafts where I did not include this kind of narrator, and tried to stick to a closer third person focalization, I found myself including lines that clearly could not have come from that character’s head. I think this is because in this way, the narrator gets to act as the reader’s conscience. A common critique of this method is that it is too authoritarian, and that it either doesn’t give the reader enough credit or it confines literary interpretation to a single, authorized view. While I can’t speak to the effect it has on other readers, in my own reading life I have found myself more than willing to question an omniscient narrator whose judgment calls disagree from my own, which has often led to an increased enjoyment of the book.

I recognize that this style is not in vogue anymore. The novel that most famously employs this technique is *Middlemarch*, a sweeping epic of Reform-era England that also has webs of interpersonal relations at its thematic heart. While I would like to point out that the vast amount of criticism surrounding *Middlemarch* offers credence to my argument that an omniscient narrator does not restrict literary criticism, I must also acknowledge that these two chapters differ from Eliot’s magnum opus in some crucial ways. Most obviously, the narrator in *Middlemarch* offers a consistent presence that usually appears at the beginning or ending of chapters. My novel, on the other hand, favors a narrow third-person perspective that is frequently interrupted. Part of my inspiration for this decision comes from a tradition in popular comic
books where the reader is spoken to, and the artificiality of the comic book as a text is reinforced. In my experience, rather than undermine the story’s narrative power, such reminders reinforce them. The reader is always unconsciously aware that the story and its characters are fake, and when the medium embraces this, while still emotionally affecting them, it’s a testament to the extraordinary technology of books.

Of course, comics and novels occupy different corners of literature, and what works in one may not work in the other. With this in mind, I’ve included a prologue that hopefully gives readers the appropriate expectations and a useful paradigm through which to view these direct addresses. The addresses enter the story just infrequently enough that the reader forgets their existence until there is another episode of them. The tight, third person narrative, and the thematic concern for interconnectedness, owes much to George Eliot, as previously mentioned, but also is reminiscent of David Mitchell, whose most famous book, *Cloud Atlas*, features six novellas tied together by recurring motifs, character heritage, and similar conflicts. Each of these novellas is in the close perspective of its main character. We experience their narratives as we experience life, without any outside information to help us filter what they perceive. A key difference between Mitchell and other writers of this style, though, is the way that his recurring motifs, or symbols, subtly break this tradition. In *Cloud Atlas*, when a lightning scar appears on the back of Luisa Rey, it’s a reminder to her of why she is an investigative journalist. In my novel, when the narrator speaks, it is a more obvious reminder to the reader that, even when the main characters act in ways we think are foolish, shortsighted, or perhaps even reprehensible, that these are individuals who are the sum of experiences. This does not mean we shouldn’t judge them; but it does mean we should offer some understanding.
This goal, I think, reflects the goals of literature. When we read we get access to other experiences that otherwise might be unavailable to us. This is not the same as experiencing that person’s life. Reading *Fun Home* does not let me know what is was like growing up in Alison Bechdel’s childhood home, just as *Middlemarch* and *Cloud Atlas* do not let me directly experience 19th century England or post-apocalyptic Korea. But they get me closer to that experience.

Which lastly brings me to the importance of New York City as a setting. While New York City in *Nocturnes in Blue* is a very different metropolis from the one that existed in the actual early 20th century, the city offers a shorthand for a continued history of diversity that is probably unparalleled in human history. My hope is that this will unconsciously provoke an association in the reader between the events that happen there and events in the real world. Fiona’s training in music will not be the same as any musical training we’re familiar with, and Felix’s fears of fatherhood will be a little different from the fears of fatherhood anybody we know has ever felt. If my novel is successful, people will care what happens to these characters anyway. And by realizing that they can empathize and feel for people whose experiences are not only different from your own, but impossible entirely, it is my hope that it will be easier – and enjoyable – for them to then exercise that empathy in real life.
Prologue

The thing about the world in your hands is that it is every bit as real as the world that currently surrounds you. As long as you read this book, you are aware that it exists. When you shut the covers, the world recedes from your attention, and the Barnes & Noble or public library takes its place in your consciousness.

But this world does not cease to exist. For this reason, its story must be told – even if it will not be told widely.

The world you’re about to read is one where jazz – specifically, jazz improvisation – gives off energy comparable to that of a combustion engine. Thus, at the point where this world departs from our own, and especially in New York City, where this book’s events unfold, race relations have been upturned. Economic power rests anew in the hands of an oppressed few, and the world will not sit still for this.

While I will do my best to step away from this narrative – to offer you the story of these two young folk in this era of flapper girls, gangsters, and Prohibition – there will be times I deem my comments necessary. Sometimes, for instance, our young hero Fiona (a farm girl raised amongst the Society of Friends, who, while with a good heart, sometimes speaks cruel or evil things from a place of ignorance) might be a mouthpiece for an opinion that cannot fairly be relegated only to her, but rather to her world and its atmosphere. Similarly, Felix (an immigrant dandy with high hopes and a work ethic to match) makes choices we, from our comfortable distance in place and time, can judge.

These opinions are not right or good. There are pioneers even now, as there were before, reminding the world that we ought to orient ourselves toward what is true, what is virtuous, and
what is beautiful. But they have not yet been heard. Society has not yet come to repentance.

When this happens, dear reader, I will step in, and explain.

This is less for their sake or my sake than for yours.

Similarly, when there is a flagrant departure in culture or norms from this world to ours, I will explain as thoroughly as pages enable. But the ultimate goal must be this: that even the people on worlds not our own deserve empathy. That even these folks are, just as we are, simply people.

For a large part of this book, I trust the words. The words can convey their humanity.

But for some of this book, dear reader, I must remember and acknowledge that kindness is only ever a step or two away from dying out; that it takes seconds of violence to undo the long hard work of lifetimes of charity.

I can tell you all of this, but it will do none of that work. You must read it for yourself. Consider my words in this beginning. We must first start with love, and proceed from there.

But since I wish you no harm, dear reader, and since I wish rather that love befall you, I must warn you that this story is not happy. No story at its natural end – until we all come to our supernatural end – will be happy. All human stories begin and end the same way. The journey is what differentiates us. Since that journey is wracked by sorrow and grievance, it must be our hope and subsistence that something joyous can be found along the way.

I would not bring you this book if I thought it would only be painful, though. And now it is time.

So, to begin: Love.
Fiona Lewis, upon boarding the bus, had had the unpoetic thought that it was “taking her to her future,” where the city of New York was the literal stand-in for what she assumed would be the rest of her life. Ever since the discovery of jazz energy--the realization that improvisation, syncopation, and other spontaneous calculated factors were several times more powerful than Ford's combustion engine--there had been a demand for musicians of all varieties to come to the city, to be trained by the Harlem Renaissance's brightest, and hopefully spread the wealth they discovered.

This future, however, got off to a rocky start when Fiona's bus took her not toward the stop near Grand Central Station, where her cousin Felix was waiting to pick her up and take her to his family's home, but instead to Chinatown, which to Fiona might as well have been Mars.

The bus was full of Chinese men, which Fiona wished didn't make her nervous. She thought back to her Sunday school classes back in Pennsylvania, where her Quaker upbringing had instilled in her the belief that the Society of Friends was friendly to all, no matter your home country – but it was hard. She was surrounded by large young men and bent over old women that spoke in a language – or was it languages? Somewhere she'd been told that there were many dialects of Chinese – she did not understand. They dressed in clothes whose cuts and colors made her own look frumpy and dull in comparison, and was it just her, or did the bus smell?

Perhaps it was because Fiona looked so nervous, or perhaps it was the beginning of a possible romance, but either way, one of the young Chinese men looked over and smiled at her.

Regardless of reason, she winced, and turned away, snuffing out the human interaction, and prompting guilt to lodge firmly somewhere in her chest. *It's just nerves*, she thought. *I'm going to a new place, leaving behind my family. It's making me think things I wouldn't normally*
think. To clear her head, she recited a brief prayer, the thrust of which was to remind herself that practiced graciousness was a worthwhile but difficult human endeavor. She looked back toward the young man to give him an apologetic smile, but it was too late; having been rejected, his head was buried down toward the bus's floor, his cheeks a fierce red, and that birdlike emotion of guilt clawed its way deeper into Fiona's ribcage.

To distract herself, she studied the musician at the front of the bus who was responsible for propelling it forward. The musician was a Chinese man playing a trumpet with exhausted gusto – the exertion you might see an athlete give toward the end of a championship game. His face was contorted in a wrinkly grimace that produced a paradoxical light, jazzy melody. Fiona and several of the other travelers were unconsciously tapping their foot to his rhythm. Fiona wondered if she should go up and compliment him; maybe some sort of social connection would be established, something that could turn into work, and besides, it would be a nice way to prove to herself that she wasn't like some prejudiced belle from the southern states. She judged people by their actions, not by where they came from.

But the time for such actions drew to a close. The bus shuddered to a stop, and as if by hive mind the passengers stirred from their seats and hoisted their luggage from beneath legs and overhead compartments. Fiona hadn’t even taken the time to look out the window and watch as the city grew up around her, which she had promised Felix she would do in her last letter – he’d said, “There’s nothing quite like seeing New York from a distance, and then watching as those huge buildings grow closer and closer until they’re on top of you. And of course, keep an eye out for our Statue. Lady Liberty’s celebrating her big 30th this year, and we couldn’t be prouder of her.”
As the bus emptied, Fiona reached and got her own bags from their place beneath her seat. There were only two. One was a suitcase full of her clothes, a Bible, and some notebooks to record her spare thoughts. She wanted to be a diarist like Mama, after all. The other was the instrument case that held her fiddle, the instrument that the entire town’s pooled money had managed to commission from an elder craftsman named Wagner down in Georgia. If given the choice, she’d sooner surrender her Bible than that fiddle. Gripping both cases’ handles tightly, she exited the bus, and determined to get a clear sense of what kind of world the city was going to be.

It was not what she had expected (remember, she was in the wrong place).

“This isn’t Grand Central Station,” she said. Nobody listened. Perhaps nobody understood her; the Chinese folks were hugging their families close, dropping coats and canes in order to greet their rushing loved ones. Their smiles were so big and luminous that it made Fiona hurt for Mama and Papa back in Pennsylvania; wildly, she turned around, looking for Felix. Perhaps she even called out his name.

He wasn’t there. Instead, she saw buildings with red roofs like pagodas connected to each other by strings with orange paper lanterns that glowed dimly in the sunlight. She saw shopkeepers sweeping doorways beside tables full of disgusting wet seafood and white papery vegetables piled high in boxes labelled with characters that looked more like elaborate tic tac toe games than an alphabet. More than one fat cat stared placidly at her with eyes embedded in plump, furry faces, their only motion the faint, question mark swishing of their tails.

From behind her, the bus driver yelled until she stepped far enough away that the doors could close. Fiona watched as the Chinese musician she’d almost complimented started up another jazz song - the music had to be jazz, it couldn’t be classical or folk - and the wheels, by
some mystical science that America’s best thinkers were keen on protecting, slowly began to turn, leading the bus away from this strange port. She wanted to chase after it, and yell at the driver – *stop, take me back, there’s been some mistake, I want to go home* - and besides, surely he must be in league with the huckster who’d sold her the erroneous ticket?

But the bus’s wake was rapidly filling with people, none of whom cared that she was alone. Now was the time she would need her wits - *for God has not given us a spirit of fear* - and so she smoothed her skirts, breathed deeply in prayer, and furiously thought about what she could do.

The first thing she did was reach into her pockets for the piece of paper that had the address Felix had given her in his last letter: *1138 Warsaw Street in Greenpoint, Brooklyn*. It was as close to a map as she was going to get in this circumstance. While Fiona had never been in the city before, she had heard Felix’s stories of visits to Chinatown, which, while she wasn’t positive, was where she had to assume she’d ended up. How to get to Brooklyn from Chinatown? And once there, how to find and get to this specific address? *Step by step*, she could hear Papa answer. Once, when she was a girl, she had asked him how anybody could ever manage to build something as big and complicated as a house. *Step by step* is what he’d told her, before adding, with a chuckle, “And enough humility to know that you’ve got to ask for help sometimes.”

Step by step. Step one, here, would be to get going in the right direction. Since she didn’t know what direction that was, she would need to ask for help. This was why Fiona stepped to the side of the road (to the gratitude of passing busses and pedestrians) and scanned the crowd for someone who looked knowledgeable, and for somebody who looked like they would be willing to help.
She ignored the Doppler effect of the passing jazz music, ignored the sound and smell of egg noodles frying in their red and yellow sauces, tried to listen past the musical babble that is any language to a hearer who doesn’t understand it, and studied the faces of the passersby. After a few moments of this scrutiny, she felt like she was growing as lethargic and imperious as the yellow shopcats. The stillness proved to be meditative, and she felt her heart rate slowing and the anxieties passing out of her with each exhalation.

After only a few minutes of this, she decided she would ask a tall, straight-backed woman in a police uniform for directions. This was despite the fact that a quiet voice nagged at her not to do so. In one of his letters to her, Felix had said something about certain police officers being untrustworthy: corrupt, in the pay of one of the mafia families, or worse, part of a bootlegging racket. The more Fiona watched this police officer, though, the more she convinced herself that this woman couldn’t be part of anything so illicit. She was older, with hair that had gone firm and gray, and beneath that hair was a face creased and weathered like the faces of old farmers who’d endured too many harsh winters. It was a kind face, however. Grandmotherly, and Fiona got the feeling that if she reached out for this person’s help she would have a warm wing to shelter beneath, and a benevolent first experience in this hot and loud metropolis she had decided to make her home. Felix, Fiona decided in that moment, was wrong about the police officers here. Besides, even she could tell that he had something of the scalawag in him, and while he might very well have good reason to be suspicious of law enforcement for some of his more rambunctious endeavors, it would certainly be nothing that she had to take into account.

Reader, remember: it is easy to think too poorly of Fiona for her naivete. For while her inability to protect herself deserves to be regretted, her wish to see good in others does not.
That small and hopeful something that stirred in her stomach grew bolder as she walked over to the policewoman. Already her mind wandered to a beautiful image of what might await her at Felix’s home that evening – Aunt Zuzanna’s cooking filling the house with hot aromatic food, and Uncle Casimir coughing and sputtering as he decried the latest corrupt development in city politics over his beer. They’d give her iced juice for her achy throat and give her a seat at a table with plenty of leg room. They’d talk about the differences between farm and city life, come up with ways she could possibly get a job in case her music tutor’s salary wasn’t enough for her to pay her way and move into her own place.

Fiona’s mother said she had a nasty habit of daydreaming when the work still had to be done, and perhaps this proved it, because while her mental fantasy played out in her head, the officer had almost disappeared into the crowd. Fiona panicked. “Officer? Officer!”

The policewoman turned, and Fiona was stymied by what looked like a discouraging frown on the older woman’s face. “Yes? Something the matter?”

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry to bother you, but I’m lost, and I’m having a terrible time finding my way here – I’m new, literally just off the bus, I have this address I’m supposed to be going to, but there’s been some sort of mistake –”

The policewoman held up a hand, and Fiona happily fell quiet. Right now, she wanted this authority figure to tell her she had all the answers. “The address?”

Fiona handed over the scrap of paper, and the policewoman’s lips sounded the words as she read them.

“1138 Warsaw Street, Greenpoint, Brooklyn,” Fiona said, in a way that she hoped was helpful.
The policewoman’s subsequent look contained a thousand little things in it - some amusement, that this country girl who was so good at reading couldn’t navigate her way to a simple address; vexation at being corrected by someone so much younger; and concern, perhaps a maternal *I know what it’s like to be where you are now* sort of expression. Being the subject of such study made Fiona blush.

“I can help you with this,” the policewoman said at last. “Follow me.”

Fiona did so with relief. As she walked behind the policewoman she said a silent prayer of thanksgiving to God for being with her through this difficult day. But it was almost over, she could tell. This was shaping up to be a simple pleasant anecdote she’d have to practice telling to her family members in order to make them laugh at her country bumpkin ignorance and her dumb good luck at getting one of the few honest police officers to help her out of this pinch.

As they walked, the policewoman decided to make conversation by asking Fiona some questions. “So what brings you to town?”

Fiona raised her fiddle case and said, “I want to be a musician.”

The officer nodded. “You and everyone else,” she said with a chuckle. “I swear, though, this is the only boom I’ve heard of where we actually have enough jobs for everyone who wants one. *Jazz,*” she said, with a shake of her head. “Who would have thought something like it would come from Harlem, of all places? Still, don’t look a gift horse in the mouth, no matter what color it is. Is this address where you’re staying?”

Fiona, who was fairly certain jazz had been born in New Orleans, decided against correcting the woman, and instead rattled off a long answer that could have been summarized with *Yes, with my family, and they know I’m coming.* But talking was a way of expressing relief at the fact she had a guide in this strange environment.
And if she’d thought Chinatown was strange, the city grew no more reassuring when she discovered its other districts. Buildings as tall as anything she’d ever seen in her life rose up around her like hundreds of towers of Babel. The smell of cooking dumplings and chicken faded into thick and heavy smog from factories that hadn’t yet made the transition from coal to music. Everything was louder than normal here because the echoes bounced off the tall buildings and magnified into a din. It only got more crowded, and the streets became a sea of bowler hats and women’s bonnets - ashy grays and light pinks or blues - that Fiona supposed she’d have to match, if she wanted to blend in.

The policewoman was a kind and patient listener. As Fiona went on about growing up in Pennsylvania, she bobbed her head at the right moments to make it clear she was listening, and interrupted only to indicate which direction they needed to take at a turn. At one point, when the throngs around them grew particularly thick, and Fiona feared that she would lose sight of her guide, she reached out and grabbed hold of the policewoman’s arm and gripped just enough that the crowd wouldn’t push her away.

The policewoman stopped abruptly and snatched her arm away from Fiona. The growl she gave was the first time Fiona’s fear in the city had been related to something present and immediate. Only when the policewoman turned back slowly and picked up the pace - eventually, she turned and asked Fiona to continue her story from where she’d left off - did Fiona relax. It was just a difference in culture. Clearly personal space was a more private, important thing in the city than it was on her homestead.

Fiona finished talking about the tallest building in her hometown - or, the town closest to the farm - when the policewoman interrupted her. “Almost there,” the policewoman said. Fiona
hadn’t realized Brooklyn was so close; somehow, the city seemed too big for that to be true.

“You know where you’re going to get work?”

“I have a job lined up as a tutor. A music tutor. My cousin set it up for me.”

“And when do you start?” the policewoman asked.

“Later this week,” Fiona said. “They’re going to be neighbors of mine, so I think it will start pretty casually.”

“It’s right here,” the policewoman said. The street she indicated looked like something out of Victorian London. Because of its proximity to a nearby factory, it was clogged with smoke and shadow, and the lampposts were on, even in daylight, which gave the street a half-baked glare. Fiona could swear everything was quieter in that street.

“That’s not where you’re taking me, is it?” she asked. It was nothing like the street Felix had detailed in his letters. Fiona couldn’t picture any kids playing baseball there. She couldn’t picture any parents who would allow their children to go there without supervision.

“Just for the moment,” the policewoman said. “This is as far as I can take you. You’re in King’s District right now, and Brooklyn is on the other side of the city – you could make it there, I reckon, but you’re as likely to get lost as not. I know a cabby who owes me a favor or two. If you like, he’ll make sure you get to your family in one piece.”

Something in the back of Fiona’s mind tickled her, warned her that this was not quite normal behavior for a police officer. But Fiona, because she was inexperienced, assumed this was embarrassment at not having any money for fare. Fiona coughed uncomfortably and mentioned this to the officer.

The policewoman laughed, and her demeanor grew more jovial and kind. If the fierce lawman had reared its head when Fiona had taken her arm without permission, now the
grandmother side of this woman was back. Her smile would feel at home in a kitchen and her eyes encouraged trust. “Did I say you’d be charged? You’re new in town. It’s the least I can do.” She could tell that Fiona wasn’t quite convinced. “If this isn’t comfortable for you, I can try to make other arrangements….”

Much later, when Fiona spent considerable time analyzing what happened, and how it came to be that her brush with life-altering tragedy was averted, she would realize how successfully this New York City policewoman had conned her.

“Oh, no, no, I don’t want any more trouble for you,” Fiona said. Later in her life, when Fiona would recall this moment, she would insert a nefarious smirk on the policewoman’s face that was almost certainly her own invention.

“Good, good, Right this way, then.” And they headed down the smoke-filled street.

Fiona was not reassured as she progressed down the path. The building they headed toward was the only one with its lights on, but, rather than being a comfort, this gave the building a ghoulish appearance, like a grin kept in place by rigor mortis. All the houses and shops looked like they’d been abandoned for some time. From the corner of her eye, she thought she saw movement in one grimy window, but when she looked, all she saw was glass. In the unknown distance, an alley cat yowled.

They stopped in front of the thin townhome and paused, as if for rest. Fiona looked up at the three stories of windows, covered with dark curtains, and wondered what was behind them. The policewoman headed up the steps to the front door, and when she noticed that Fiona didn’t follow behind her, she waved the girl on. Fiona reluctantly did so.
The policewoman knocked on the door. The door opened promptly to reveal a tall, pale woman dressed in black mourning clothes. Her hair reached past her shoulders in a braid that wasn’t much thinner than she was.

“Officer,” the woman said. She reminded Fiona of an insect or a skeleton. “What a pleasant surprise. Please, come in.”

She held the door open for Fiona, but Fiona would not go in. She hesitated. The door yawned open like something out of the Bible. She started to turn, and head back down the step –

“I don’t want to –”

But her hesitation came too late. The policewoman placed a hand on the small of Fiona’s back and shoved the girl through the door.

As soon as Fiona was through the threshold, the tall woman slammed the door behind her. Unseen men responded to her commands, and before Fiona could cry out for help, strong hands held her still, and a sack was thrown over her head.

“Wait!” she screamed. “Please!”

“Gag her,” she heard the tall woman say softly. Despite the fact that Fiona had been a laborer all her life, and was therefore stronger than most women her age, she could not budge from her captors’ terrible grip.

“Why are you—” she managed to cry, before her mouth was muffled with a rag smelling sharply of acid.

“That’s right,” the woman said. “Breathe it in. Just relax. You’re where you belong, now. Don’t resist.”

Fiona wanted to scream, but her tongue felt dead in her mouth. Before unconsciousness took her, her last thought was *Felix, you were supposed to take me home. Felix, help me….*
Somewhere in the city, she thought she could hear the melody of a jazz trumpet playing softly.
When Felix woke up to the sound of men screaming, he thought mildly to himself that he could be dead by evening, if he didn’t play his cards right.

It was early in the morning. He was stretched out in bed with a young woman, and the blankets and pillows were warm and conformed to his body after a few hours of peaceful sleep. Leona had her arm stretched over his chest, and her hair smelled sweetly of floral perfume and sex. It mingled nicely with scents of expensive tobacco that wafted up from her father’s study below.

The sounds were growing louder. He heard a clatter of furniture and what sounded like rifles being grabbed. He’d have to move quickly – but Felix Judowitz was nothing if not a swift man.

Indeed, being caught in the boudoir of a mafia don’s daughter had surely been the death sentence for less fortunate scoundrels. But that was part of the thrill for Felix, and besides, Leona was worth the risk in every way, shape and form. It wasn’t the first time he’d spent the night with her, and the trysts seemed to be getting only better – and while her father and brother might insist she was virginal, Felix knew he wasn’t the only man who’d risked his life for this kind of reward.

Yes, Felix realized as he clambered out of the sheets and pulled up his discarded pants, he was in love with Leona Moritone. And a man in love is willing to risk foolish things to be with his beloved.

He rammed his feet into his boots and shivered. He was shocked at how cold morning air could be compared to a bed warmed by two bodies. Leona lay barely covered by her blankets:
her long dark hair was splayed out like a fan over the white skin of her back. Something stirred in his belly, something that would make him come back again, despite the violent men whose vigilance would be further stoked. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. “Looks like I’ve got to go, sweetheart,” he said, and he thought he saw her stir. It was probably wishful thinking. Absentmindedly, he wondered how Leona’s family had found out about him. A jealous rival for her affections, perhaps? Come to think of it, he’d been flagrantly courting her last night - the vaudeville show, the roses, the singer he’d paid to embarrass her with terrible love poetry set to a garish tune. Not that now was the time to recall everything – boots were clomping up the stairs, and had almost reached the door. He grabbed his shirt and his belt and pulled the window open.

He hated leaving like this, but he was sure she’d figure out where he went when her family woke her up. He was also of the opinion that it was better for her to try and put two and two together than try and put him back together, so after one last look- and just as he heard the door burst open and an aghast voice curse him in Italian - he was already out the window.

Leona’s room was on the third floor of the building, and Felix descended the metal framework of the fire escape like it was a fireman’s pole, which was the only thing that kept him ahead of Leona’s brothers. Felix landed with a roll amidst a crowd on its way to work, and because this was the Italian district, his nose flared at the scent of butter on hot bread. It was pleasant air to fill his lungs as he took off running.

Felix knew Leona and her family well, so he decided to zigzag as he sprinted, just in case. Sure enough, he heard the *zer-kow* of a bullet ricocheting off the pavement by his feet. Adrenaline urged him to go faster. The man shooting at him was in all likelihood Leona’s brother, Sergio, and Felix would have to be careful of that one. Sergio was acknowledged to be
one of the three deadliest knife fighters in the city, and had a penchant for hiring his father’s hitmen to beat up or kill those who angered him.

But, for now at least, he was safe. Felix rounded a corner of a shady alleyway and rested his hands on his knees. The shade in this street was the shade of morning sun, and his surroundings were still bright and airy. His chest blew up and out like a balloon as he caught his breath. He couldn’t help but smile as he peeked around the corner and looked at Leona’s window. There was Sergio, a fist comically raised at the scoundrel who’d been with his sister, and there too was Leona, sheet clutched to her chest as she waved at Felix and grinned. Felix ducked back and decided that he could take his time heading away from the Italian district now. The Moritone family wasn’t the kind to give chase. If they really wanted to punish him, they’d study his habits and find the best time to strike. But because Felix knew these things, it would be that much harder for them to act; and besides, Leona was in his corner. He was certain it would be hard for her father to be too angry at the young men in her life when it was clear she enjoyed their company.

Yes, it was a sunny and brand new day, and as Felix whistled merrily (and as Fiona disembarked from her bus and looked for someone to help her) he idly debated where he should get his breakfast. It was only several minutes later, after his mind had replayed the events of the night a few times, that he spared a thought for his cousin, and remembered that he was supposed to meet her at a bus stop near Grand Central Station.

Felix paused, but there was no reason to rush. Fiona was a smart girl, and she’d confirmed in her last letter to him that she had received his address. If he was a bit late meeting her, she’d find her way easily enough.
Felix ambled over to a market stand owned by a plump woman selling fresh fruit. He flipped a few coins at her and took the shiniest apple from her pile with a wink. He crunched and chewed as he strode toward the nearest bus stop with a route to Grand Central Station. The first time he realized what time it was was when a big clock in a nearby bank’s window told him it wasn’t even eight yet. Nothing to worry about. Buses were always running late, especially if they came from farm towns, where people’s understanding of punctuality was rounding up to the nearest half hour. In fact, knowing Fiona, it was just as likely that she’d gotten on the wrong bus. He certainly wouldn’t delay going to see her, now, because he knew that there were some dangers she wasn’t prepared for – pickpockets and the like – but he’d dealt with Fiona when she was irritated before. He’d buy her some breakfast to make it up to her.

The market streets widened into the streets of New York’s city proper, where the buildings grew taller like men donning top hats, and the air lost its scent of bread in order to gain the music of jazz.

It moved him every time: New York, the old Dutch colony, grown into something even the most ambitious minds among those settlers couldn’t have anticipated. Cultures from all over the world moved here for a chance at a better life - slightly more roof over their heads, bread not filled with bugs or mold, children with a chance at an education. They brought their music and their cuisine, their languages and their faiths, and then they all blended into something as they learned enough English to make their way in this big and brassy city that had the audacity to keep reaching up and to keep growing along the harbor.

Felix settled onto a bench at a bus stop and was pleased to see that he was just in time. A bus pulled up in front of him, and the saxophonist at its front took a huge, raggedy breath during his rest. He stood, paid the driver, and before long he was on his way to meet his cousin. It
wasn’t every day he got to introduce someone to this New York City kind of life, which he hoped she liked as much as he did.

But when he finally got to Grand Central Station, it wasn’t long before he realized that something had gone very wrong.

To begin with, Fiona was nowhere to be seen.

Felix was late, so perhaps this was to be expected – but what was worse, none of the buses on the schedule were from Fiona’s home town in Pennsylvania. When he asked a station worker about this, he was told that none of the bus routes even stopped there.

Felix knew this city, which meant that he had some idea about what could have possibly happened.

The most likely and most innocent explanation was that Fiona had simply misunderstood what kind of ticket she was buying. Which meant that she would end up in the wrong place, find a local citizen to help her get her bearings, and be on her way to 1138 Warsaw Street in no time. This would be ideal for the both of them, because it would mean nobody would ever know that he had been late because of a woman. He could claim he’d been here the whole time, worried sick about her.

But there was a darker possibility, a possibility grotesque and lurid enough that it started to gnaw away at Felix’s insides. Just the fact that it was possible was enough to feed his anxiety. There were some underworld rackets that sold bus tickets to New York City under false pretenses – wrong destination, wrong arrival time – to one or two gullible individuals who didn’t know any better with the goal of whisking them away and into captivity. This captivity meant sex work or slavery, and with the recent rise in displaced industrial workers, this kind of
abominable business had unfortunately taken off enough that it was a central issue of the upcoming Senate election.

He cursed himself for being so stupid (maybe); he cursed Fiona for being so gullible and falling into a mess that now he had to help her escape (though he didn’t know this for sure); and he cursed Aunt Zuzanna, who would excoriate him, roast him, destroy him if she found out he hadn’t watched over his cousin (she would probably blame this situation on him no matter how it turned out).

Felix rubbed his temples and thanked the station worker for his help. Here was Grand Central Station, a city in miniature abuzz with two kinds of motion. There was the sleek black angular motion of trains and buses pulling away in straight lines toward a perpendicular horizon, and there was the surrounding swarm of their disgorged crowds, undulating in too many different directions to track. And last of all was the golden stillness of the architecture, giving the space its third dimension, the depth of civilization.

Felix had to find a Quaker girl in all this mess.

He sighed, took one last bite out of the apple he’d purchased for breakfast, and then threw its core into the train tracks. Best get to it.

The first thing he did was head for the ticket sellers’ office. The glass boxes were staffed by underpaid, overworked tellers in ridiculous red hats that the train companies made them wear. They were forced to serve irate customers who had been shortchanged or sold the wrong ticket, or who were otherwise made irritable by travel. These people were made more unbearable by the long waits they were forced to endure, and thus only the most patient, or the most desperate, employees were willing to become ticket sellers at Grand Central Station.
Felix stepped to the side of the lines and squinted to see who was working. If he was lucky, Candace would be on staff today - and sure enough, he saw the young woman working efficiently with a bright and cheery fake smile. Candace was a longtime friend of his, and he’d meant to catch up with her soon anyway. Felix felt a twinge of guilt. Candace was a slightly heavier girl, and he suspected she’d had a longstanding crush on him that, while unrequited, he’d been careful not to take advantage of. What he was about to ask of her now felt perilously close to doing just that.

He walked up to the window, past a long line of indignant customers, and knocked.

Candace started. “Felix?”

“Hi,” he said, with some charm and desperation. “Can you take a lunch break?”

“Umm, Felix,” Candace said, pointing to her pocketwatch, “it’s not even nine o’clock.”

“It’s important,” Felix said.

A gruff man in the ticket line tapped Felix on the shoulder. “Hey buddy, I don’t know what you think you’re about, people’re waiting here.”

Candace ignored him. “Give me a moment.” She flipped the sign over her station that said Attendant On Break - Be Back Shortly, which caused a bit of an outcry. Felix gave them what he hoped was a mollifying shrug before running to the back of the ticket booth to meet up with Candace.

She met with him just behind the ticket booth, which was littered with the burned out cigarettes of attendees smoking their stress away. All of the baroque splendor of Grand Central Station vanished at this point and was replaced with ashy brick, exposed and corroded pipes, and
Candace had been annoyed with him when he first told her what happened, but his concern for Fiona seemed to be making her more amenable to helping.

“You lost your cousin?”

“I mean, bluntly speaking, yes.”

“I am speaking bluntly, Felix. You don’t have any idea where she could be at this point,” Candace continued.

“If I did, I’d be there looking.”

“And you don’t know if she’s lost, heading back to your house, or kidnapped and in danger.”

“Repeating it does not make me feel any better about the situation. I promise you, I feel right terrible for this mess, but I’m trying to do right by it now, and I could use your help.”

Candace scratched the bridge of her nose and motioned for Felix to give her a cigarette. Even though he’d quit to save money, she knew he still carried some on him. “I swear, Felix, you are the biggest dunderhead I know. And that’s including the men in my family.”

“Look, I get it, but we still don’t know for sure this is my fault,” Felix protested. “What do I do if she just took the wrong bus?”

“Not that, you dunce,” Candace snapped. “I’m talking about the fact that you’re only thinking about yourself. You do realize your cousin is alone and lost in the biggest, most inhospitable place in the world, right? And she’s from where, Pennsylvania? Christ Almighty, Felix, she must be petrified by now, if she’s not dead in a gutter attracting rats.”

Felix stared at his shoes. “I always turn to you for your rosy outlook on life, Candace,” he said. “And yes, I get that, and I’m bothered by that, but just cuz I don’t express things as
eloquently as you doesn’t mean I don’t care. Look, can you help me find her or not? Because if
not, then I appreciate all this, but I’ve got to find someone who can.”

Candace took a lighter from her coat pocket and flicked open a flame. “Only information
you have is she’s coming from Pennsylvania, and was supposed to be here at 8:30 this
morning?”

“She hitched a ride from Quaker’s Mill to Pittsburgh, then hopped on a bus up here.”

Candace lowered her lips to the flame and made a kissing motion to get the cigarette lit.
She looked like she was debating whether or not to tell him something.

“Remember my brother-in-law, Rex?” Candace asked.

Felix did. He’d been a groomsman at Rex’s wedding even though he didn’t know him at
all, which was a result of the sad fact that Rex was the kind of guy who couldn’t come up with
three friends to accompany the bridesmaids. Candace didn’t talk about him much anymore, ever
since her sister had died in a warehouse fire last year. Felix hadn’t spared him much thought
since. “Sure,” Felix said.

“She’s a P.I., and a good one, too,” Candace said. “But, ah, he’s been having a hard time
keeping work since Felicia died. Hit the bottle too hard and all that. Part of me thinks you should
hire him.”

“Only a part of you?”

“Well, he’ll do a good job if he sets his mind to it. It’s just that no one’s really heard from
him for a while. Which frankly means his rate will probably be discounted enough so you can
afford him.”

“Thanks,” Felix said.
“So I won’t say I recommend him,” Candace decided. “But I’ll give you his address. If you say I recommended you, he might even remember you were a groomsman. Who knows, the work might be good for him.” Candace reached into her purse and pulled out a business card. “Over in Queens,” she said. “His office is a bit of a pit, and his apartment is just overhead. You’ll want to make sure you visit in the day, just to be safe. If you hurry now, you might be able to get him during business hours.”

Felix nodded, thrummed his fingers along the table’s shiny top. This was not how he’d imagined he’d spend his day.

“Well, won’t hurt to stop in on him. Maybe I’ll hire him and go back home to find Fiona cranky with me. Thanks, Candace. I’ll see you.”

He turned to leave, but Candace placed a hand on his arm.

“Felix?” Candace said. She was hesitating - was it something he’d done, or something he was feeling? (Felix had a hard time understanding other people’s emotions when they didn’t revolve around him). “Be careful with him. He’s hurting. He’s more fragile than he seems.”

Felix gently disentangled himself. “I’ll be kind,” he said.

“Don’t mention Felicia.”

Felix raised an eyebrow. “I’m not an idiot.”

“Most of the time,” Candace replied, with a smile curved around her cigarette.

Felix grinned as well, then looked at the time. It was close to when Candace said she would have to head back. “Let me buy you lunch some time,” he said, but Candace declined.

“I’m just helping a friend, okay? Now move. You have to get going if you want to get to Queens on time,” she said.

“Okay,” Felix said.
He paused this time, just to see if Candace had more to say, and as she put out her cigarette – it wasn’t even half smoked – she said, “Felix, next time we hang out, can it just be to see me?”

Felix felt his cheeks grow hot as he remembered, quickly, the last few times he’d spoken with Candace, and how they’d all been related to favors he needed from her.

“Sure thing, Candace. Next time.”

“Next time,” his friend repeated. Candace nodded goodbye and ducked back through the door to the ticket office. Before it shut behind her, Felix was fairly certain he saw a man with thick mustaches and a manager’s vest looking displeased with her. He suddenly realized he might have gotten her in trouble for this.

The morning’s events were moving almost too quickly for him to keep track of. Leona and Sergio, Fiona, then Candace and Rex. They all took up seats in his mind, occupying spots as if his brain were a car on a trolley. The one thing they all had in common was that he knew he owed them something, even if he wasn’t entirely sure what it was yet. In that moment, despite the bustle of the city, the world felt quiet.

As he made his way over to Queens, he wondered how much of what Candace had said about Rex was true, and if so, how hard it would be to get the detective to help him find his cousin.