

'IMMENSELY ENJOYABLE' OBSERVER

FOURTEEN DAYS



A COLLABORATIVE
NOVEL

Including
CELESTE NG
JOHN GRISHAM
EMMA DONOGHUE
DAVE EGGERS
MEG WOLITZER
TESS GERRITSEN
SYLVIA DAY
and more

Edited by
**MARGARET
ATWOOD
&
DOUGLAS
PRESTON**

MARGARET ATWOOD

Margaret Atwood is the author of more than fifty books of fiction, poetry and critical essays. Her novels include *Cat's Eye*, *The Robber Bride*, *Alias Grace*, *The Blind Assassin* and the MaddAddam trilogy. Her 1985 classic, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was followed in 2019 by a sequel, *The Testaments*, which was a global number-one bestseller and shared the Booker Prize. In 2020 she published *Dearly*, her first collection of poetry for a decade; and her 2022 selection of essays, *Burning Questions*, and 2023 volume of short stories, *Old Babes in the Wood*, were both *Sunday Times* bestsellers. Atwood has won numerous awards including the Arthur C. Clarke Award for Imagination in Service to Society, the Franz Kafka Prize, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, the PEN USA Lifetime Achievement Award and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. In 2019 she was made a member of the Order of the Companions of Honour for services to literature. She has also worked as a cartoonist, illustrator, librettist, playwright and puppeteer. She lives in Toronto, Canada.

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DOUGLAS PRESTON

Douglas Preston has published thirty-nine books of fiction and non-fiction, of which thirty-two have been *New York Times* bestsellers, some reaching the number-one position. Two of his novels, co-written with Lincoln Child, were chosen in a National Public Radio poll of readers as being among the 100 greatest thrillers ever written. His recent non-fiction book, *The Lost City of the Monkey God*, was named a notable book of the year by the *New York Times*, *the Boston Globe* and *National Geographic*. In addition to books, Preston writes about archaeology and paleontology for the *New Yorker*. He worked as an editor for the American Museum of Natural History in New York and taught non-fiction writing at Princeton University. He is the recipient of numerous writing awards in the US and Europe, and he served as president of the Authors Guild from 2019 to 2023.

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Fourteen Days

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The translation of the Japanese poem by Minamoto-no-Shitagou on
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Several of the descriptive epigrams attached to the building tenants
are adapted from Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde.

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A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS GUILD FOUNDATION

YOU ARE HOLDING IN YOUR HANDS A NOVEL THAT IS BOTH SINGULAR AND extraordinary. The word “novel” comes from the Latin word *novellus*, through the Italian word *novella*, to describe a story that was not the reworking of a familiar tale, myth, or Biblical parable, but something new, fresh, strange, amusing, and surprising.

Fourteen Days meets that definition. It is a collaborative novel that is startling and original—you might even call it a literary event. It is written by thirty-six American and Canadian authors, from all genres, ranging in age from their thirties to mid-eighties, who come from a remarkable variety of cultural, political, social, and religious backgrounds. It is not a serial novel, nor is it a classic frame narrative in the mold of the *Decameron* or *The Canterbury Tales*. It is an epic novellus in the ancient and truest sense of the word.

The authors who wrote the stories in this book remain unbylined. Until you look up the list at the end, you will not know who wrote what. Most of these authors are eminent in their various genres, from romance to thriller, from literary to children’s books, from poetry to nonfiction. *Fourteen Days* is, in this way, a celebration of the diversity of North American authors and a thumb in the eye of the literary balkanization of our culture.

The storytellers in *Fourteen Days* are a group of New Yorkers left behind during the Covid-19 pandemic, unable to escape to the countryside as affluent city dwellers mostly did at the beginning of the pandemic, and as the privileged have done for centuries in the face of

disaster. Every evening, the neighbors gather on the rooftop of their shabby building on the Lower East Side to bang pots, cheer the Covid responders, argue with one another—and tell stories. As in any good novel, there are conflicts, redemption, and a whole lot of surprises along the way.

Above all, *Fourteen Days* is a celebration of the power of stories. Since long before the invention of writing, we human beings have faced our gravest challenges by telling stories. When we are confronted with war, violence, terror—or a pandemic—we tell stories to sort things out and push back against a frightening and incomprehensible world. Stories tell us where we've been and where we're going. They make sense of the senseless and bring order to disorder. They transmit our values across generations and affirm our ideals. They skewer the powerful, expose the fraudulent, and give voice to the disenfranchised. In many cultures, the storytelling act invokes magical powers to heal spiritual and physical sickness and to transform the profane into the sacred. Evolutionary biologists believe the storytelling thirst is hard-wired into our genes: stories are what make us human.

We at the Authors Guild Foundation are pleased to present to you the novellus entitled *Fourteen Days*.

The novel's structure and themes reflect the mission of the Authors Guild Foundation, the charitable and educational arm of the Authors Guild, and *Fourteen Days* is a charitable project, with proceeds going to support the work of the Foundation. The Foundation was established on the belief that a rich, diverse body of free literary expression is essential to our democracy. We foster and empower writers of all backgrounds and stages of their careers by educating authors in the business of writing, providing resources, programs, and tools to American authors, and promoting an understanding of the value of writers and the writing profession. The Foundation is the sole organization of its kind dedicated to empowering all authors, reflecting the venerable spirit of the writers who established it—Toni Morrison, James A. Michener, Saul Bellow, Madeleine L'Engle, and Barbara Tuchman, among others—who all came from a diverse background of genres themselves.

The Authors Guild Foundation is extremely grateful to Margaret Atwood for taking the helm and convincing so many talented writers to join the project. We give enormous thanks to Doug Preston, the former president of the Authors Guild, for coming up with the concept and writing the frame narrative. We extend our enormous gratitude to Suzanne Collins, who made a generous donation to the Guild that funded honorariums for all contributors.

Our tremendous gratitude also goes to Daniel Conaway, Writers House literary agency, and its head, Simon Lipskar, who donated 100 percent of their commissions to the Authors Guild Foundation. Dan provided extraordinary and wise assistance from start to finish. We wish to thank Liz Van Hoose, who served as the project editor in originally compiling the stories, and to Millicent Bennett, our wonderful editor at HarperCollins, who recognized the compelling nature of *Fourteen Days* and has been an invaluable steward of the book, helping tirelessly to shape it and championing it through publication. In addition, thanks to Angela Ledgerwood at Sugar23 Books and the rest of the HarperCollins team for their enthusiastic support of the project, including Jonathan Burnham, Katie O’Callaghan, Maya Baran, Lydia Weaver, Diana Meunier, Elina Cohen, Robin Bilardello, and Liz Velez. We also wish to thank the Authors Guild team who work tirelessly to protect the rights of authors.

Most of all, we wish to thank the thirty-six authors who participated in this collaboration.

They are:

Charlie Jane Anders, Margaret Atwood, Jennine Capó Crucet, Joseph Cassara, Angie Cruz, Pat Cummings, Sylvia Day, Emma Donoghue, Dave Eggers, Diana Gabaldon, Tess Gerritsen, John Grisham, Maria Hinojosa, Mira Jacob, Erica Jong, CJ Lyons, Celeste Ng, Tommy Orange, Mary Pope Osborne, Douglas Preston, Alice Randall, Ishmael Reed, Roxana Robinson, Nelly Rosario, James Shapiro, Hampton Sides, R. L. Stine, Nafissa Thompson-Spires, Monique Truong, Scott Turow, Luis Alberto Urrea, Rachel Van, Weiwei Wang, Caroline Randall Williams, De’Shawn Charles Winslow, and Meg Wolitzer.

All proceeds from this literary work will benefit the Authors Guild Foundation. Part of the advance for this book went toward the Guild's and Foundation's combined efforts to support writers during the worst of the pandemic, when publication dates were delayed, bookstores and libraries closed, and authors struggled to launch their new books. A survey conducted by the Guild showed that a staggering 71 percent of Guild members experienced an income decline of as much as 49 percent during the pandemic due to delayed publishing dates; canceled book tours, readings, and lectures; lost writing assignments; and other work. The Guild lobbied Congress to include regulations and legislation that included freelance writers in the Covid relief package, after they had been unaccountably left out of the original legislation.

The Foundation has put additional portions of the advance to work on fighting school and library book bans and calls for library closures. It has signed on to and filed amicus briefs in several litigations challenging the removal and banning of books and the recent laws encouraging or requiring such bans.

Projects supported by the foundation include the Stop Book Bans Toolkit and a Banned Books Club with over seven thousand members on the Fable platform that ensures young people and others around the country can read and discuss books subject to recent bans. With the Authors Guild, the Foundation is an active member of Unite Against Book Bans and works on campaigns with the National Coalition Against Censorship.

The Authors Guild Foundation supports the Authors Guild as it vigorously represents authors' concerns in Washington, educating and drafting and advising Congress on legislation that would help—or harm—authors. Together with the Authors Guild, the Foundation litigates and submits amicus briefs in key court cases to protect authors' rights and ensure the health of the publishing ecosystem and the writing profession, as well as to support freedom of expression.

The members of the Authors Guild include novelists in all genres and categories, nonfiction writers, journalists, historians, poets, and translators. The Guild welcomes traditionally published authors as

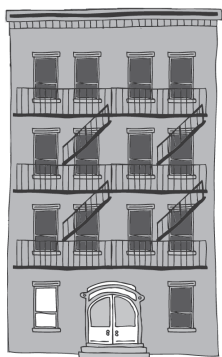
well as self-published, independent authors. The benefits of a Guild membership include: legal assistance from contract reviews to advising on copyright and media law issues and intervening in legal disputes; a marketing assistance program to ready authors for publication of a new book; prestigious press credentials for freelance journalists; a vibrant online community forum to share information with fellow authors; insurance options and discount programs; website hosting; model agreements; local chapters and programs; opportunities to meet fellow authors; and webinars and seminars on the business of publishing, marketing, self-publishing, taxes, literary estates, and more.

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Day One

MARCH 31, 2020

CALL ME 1A. I'M THE SUPER OF A BUILDING ON RIVINGTON STREET ON THE Lower East Side of New York City. It's a six-floor walk-up with the farcical name of the Fernsby Arms, a decaying craphack tenement that should have been torn down long ago. It's certainly not keeping up with the glorious yuppification of the neighborhood. As far as I know, nobody famous has ever lived here; there have been no serial killers, subversive graffiti artists, notorious drunken poets, radical feminists, or Broadway song pluggers commuting to Tin Pan Alley. There might have been a murder or two—the building looks it—but nothing that made the *New York Times*. I hardly know the tenants at all. I'm new here—got the job a few weeks ago, around the time the city was shut down by Covid. The apartment came with the job. Its number, 1A, sounded like it was on the first floor. But when I got here—and it was too late to back out—I found it was actually in the basement and as dark as the broom closet of Hades and a cell phone dead zone to match. The basement in this building is the first floor, the second floor is the real first floor, and so on up to six. A con.

The pay in the Fernsby Arms is rotten, but I was desperate, and it kept me from winding up on the street. My father came here from Romania as a teenager, married, and worked like a dog as the super of a building in Queens. And then I was born. When I was eight, my mom left. I tagged along as Dad fixed leaky faucets, changed lightbulbs, and dispensed wisdom. I was pretty adorable as a kid, and he brought

me along to increase his tips. (I'm still adorable, thank you very much.) He was one of those supers people liked to confide in. While he was plunging a shit-blocked toilet or setting out roach motels, the tenants liked to pour out their troubles. He'd sympathize, offering benediction and reassurance. He always had an old Romanian saying to comfort them, or some tidbit of ancient wisdom from the Carpathian Mountains—that plus his Romanian accent made him sound wiser than he really was. They loved him. At least some of them did. I loved him, too, because none of this was for show; it's how he really was, a warm, wise, loving, faux-stern kind of dad—his one drawback being that he was too Old World to realize how much his ass was being mowed every day by Life in America. Suffice to say, I did not inherit his kindly, forgiving nature.

Dad wanted a different life for me, far away from having to fix other people's shit. He saved like mad so I could go to college; I got a basketball scholarship to SUNY and planned to be a sportscaster. We argued about that—Dad wanted me to be an engineer ever since I won the First Lego League robotics prize in fifth grade. College didn't work out. I got kicked off the college basketball team when I tested positive for weed. And then I dropped out, leaving my dad \$30,000 in debt. It wasn't \$30,000 in the beginning; it started out as a small loan to supplement my scholarship, but the vig grew like a tumor. After leaving school, I moved to Vermont for a bit and lived off a lover's generosity, but a bad thing happened, and I moved back in with my dad, waiting tables at Red Lobster in Queens Place Mall. When Dad started going downhill from Alzheimer's, I covered up for him as best I could in the building, fixing stuff in the mornings before going to work. But eventually, a miserable toad in the building reported us to the landlord, and he was forced to retire. (Using my master key, I flushed a bag of my Legos down her toilet as a thank-you.) I had to move him to a home. We had no money, so the state put him in a memory care center in New Rochelle. Evergreen Manor. What a name. Evergreen. The only thing green about it are the walls—vomit-puss-asylum green, you know the color. *Come for the lifestyle. Stay for a lifetime.* The day I moved

him in, he threw a plate of fettuccini Alfredo at me. Up until the lockdown, I'd been visiting him when I could, which hasn't been much because of my asthma and the ongoing shit-saster known as My Life.

All these bills started pouring in related to Dad's care and treatment, even though I thought Medicare was supposed to pay. But no, they don't. Just you wait until you're old and sick. You should have seen the two-inch stack I burned in a wastebasket, setting off the fire alarms. That was in January. The building hired a new super—they didn't want me because I'm a woman, even though I know that building better than anyone—and I was given thirty days to move out. I got fired from Red Lobster because I missed too many days taking care of my dad. The stress of no job and looming homelessness brought on another asthma attack, and they raced me to the ER at Presbyterian and stuck me full of tubes. When I got out of the hospital, all my shit had been taken from the apartment—everything, Dad's stuff, too. I still had my phone, and there was an offer in my email for this Fernsby job, with an allegedly furnished apartment, so I jumped on it.

Everything happened so quickly. One day the coronavirus was something going on in Wu-the-hell-knows-where-han, and the next thing you know, we're in a global pandemic right here in the US of A. I had been planning to visit Dad as soon as I'd moved into a new place, but in the meantime I'd been FaceTiming him at Pukegreen Manor almost every day with the help of a nurse's aide. Then all of a sudden, they called out the National Guard to surround New Rochelle, and Dad was at ground zero, blocked off from the rest of the world. Worse, I suddenly couldn't get anyone on the phone up there, not the reception desk or the nurse's cell or Dad's own phone. I called and called. First it just rang, endlessly, or someone took the phone off the hook and it was busy forever, or I got a computer voice asking me to leave a message. In March, the city got shut down because of Covid, and I found myself in the aforesaid basement apartment full of weird junk in a ramshackle building with a bunch of random tenants I didn't know.

I was a little nervous because most people don't expect the super to be a woman, but I'm six feet tall, strong as heck, and capable of

anything. My dad always said I was *strălucitor*, which means radiant in Romanian, which would be such a dad thing to say, except it happens to be true. I get a *lot* of attention from men—unwanted, obviously, since I don't swing that way—but they don't worry me. Let's just say I've handled my share of fuckwad men in the past, and they're not going to forget it any time soon, so trust me, I can handle whatever this super job throws at me. I mean, Dracula was my great-grandfather thirteen times removed, or so Dad claims. Not Dracula the dumbass Hollywood vampire, but Vlad Dracula III, king of Walachia, also known as Vlad the Impaler—of Saxons and Ottomans. I can figure out and fix anything. I can divide in my head a five-digit number by a two-digit number, and I once memorized the first forty digits of pi and can still recite them. (What can I say: I like numbers.) I don't expect to be in the Fernsby Arms forever, but for the moment, I can tough it out. It's not like Dad's in a position to be disappointed in me anymore.

When I started this job, the retiring super was already gone. Guess not every building wipes out all the super's stuff when they leave, 'cause the apartment was packed with his junk and, man, the guy was a hoarder. I could hardly move around, so the first thing I did, I went through it all and made two piles—one for eBay and the other for trash. Most of it was crap, but some if it was worth good money, and there were a few items I had hopes might be valuable. Did I mention I need money?

To give you an idea of what I found, here's a random list: six Elvis 45s tied in a dirty ribbon, glass prayer hands, a jar of old subway tokens, a velvet painting of Vesuvius, a plague mask with a big curved beak, an accordion file stuffed with papers, a blue butterfly pinned in a box, a lorgnette with fake diamonds, a wad of old Greek paper money. Most wonderful of all was a pewter urn full of ashes and engraved Wilbur P. Worthington III, R.I.P. Wilbur was a dog, I assume, though he could have been a pet python or wombat, for all I know. No matter how hard I looked, I couldn't find anything personal about the old super, even his name. So I've come to think of him as Wilbur, too. I picture him as an old man with a harrumphing, what-do-we-have-here

manner, unshaven, evaluating a broken windowshade with his wet lips sticking out pensively, making little grunts. *Wilbur P. Worthington III, Superintendent, The Fernsby Arms.*

Eventually, in the closet I found a hoard of something far more to my liking: a rainbow array of half-empty liquor bottles, spirits, and mixers crowding every shelf from top to bottom.

The accordion file intrigued me. Inside were a bunch of miscellaneous papers. They were not the super's scribblings, for sure—these were documents he'd collected from somewhere. Some were old, typed with a manual typewriter, some printed by computer, and a few handwritten. Most of them seemed to be first-person narratives, incomprehensible, rambling stories with no beginning or end, no plot, and no bylines—random splinters and scraps of lives. Many were missing pages, the narratives beginning and ending in the middle of sentences. There were also some long letters in there, too, and unintelligible legal documents. All this stuff was mine, I supposed, and I was sick when I thought of how this alien trash was all I had in the world, replacing everything I used to own that my dad's building had thrown out.

But among the stuff in the apartment was a fat binder, sitting all by itself on a wooden desk with peeling veneer, a chewed Bic pen resting on top of it. When I say "chewed," I mean half-eaten, my mysterious predecessor having gnawed off at least an inch from the top. The desktop was about the only neatly organized place in the apartment. The handmade book immediately intrigued me. Its title was on the cover, drawn in Gothic script: *The Fernsby Bible*. On the first page, the old super had clipped a note to the new super—that is, me—explaining that he was an amateur psychologist and trenchant observer of human nature, and that these were his research notes, collected on the residents. They were extensive. I paged through it, amazed at the thoroughness and density of the work. And then at the end of the binder, he had added a mass of blank pages, with the heading "Notes and Observations." And then he'd added a small note at the bottom: "(For the Next Superintendent to Fill in.)"

I looked at those blank pages and thought to myself that the old

super was crazy to think his successor—or anyone, for that matter—would want to fill them up. Little did I know the magical allure that a half-eaten pen and blank paper would have on me.

I turned back to the super's writings. He was prolific, filling pages and pages of accounts of the tenants in the building, penned in a fanatically neat hand—with sharp comments on their histories, quirks and foibles, what to watch out for, and all-important descriptions of their tipping habits. It was packed with stories and anecdotes, asides and riddles, factoids, flatulences, and quips. He had given everyone a nickname. They were funny and cryptic at the same time. “She is the Lady with the Rings,” he wrote of the tenant in 2D. “She will have rings and things and fine array.” Or the tenant in 6C: “She is La Cocinera, sous-chef to fallen angels.” 5C: “He is Eurovision, a man who refuses to be what he isn't.” Or 3A: “He is Wurly, whose tears become notes.” A lot of his nicknames and notes were like these—riddles. Wilbur must've been a champion procrastin角度, writing in this book instead of fixing leaky faucets and broken windows in this shithole of a building.

As I read through those bound pages I was transfixed. Aside from the strangeness of it all, they were pure gold to this newbie super. I set out to memorize every tenant, nickname, and apartment number. It's my essential reading. Ridiculous as it is, I'd be lost without *The Fernsby Bible*. The building's a shambles, and he apologized about that, explaining that the absentee landlord didn't respond to requests, won't pay for anything, won't even answer the damn phone—the bastard is totally AWOL. “You'll be frustrated and miserable,” he wrote, “until you realize: You're on your own.”

On the back cover of the bible, he scotch-taped a key with a note: “Check it out.”

I thought it was a master key to the apartments, but I tested it and found out it wasn't. It was a strangely shaped key that didn't even fit into the many locks I tried it on. I became intrigued and, as soon as I could, I started going through the building methodically, testing it in every lock, to no avail. I was about to give up when, at the end of the sixth-floor hall, I found a narrow staircase to the roof. At the top was

a padlocked door—and lo and behold, the key slipped right into that padlock! I opened the door, stepped out, and looked around.

I was stunned. The rooftop was damn near paradise, never mind the spiders and pigeon shit, and loose flapping tar paper. It was big, and the panorama was stupendous. The tenements on either side of the Fernsby Arms had recently been torn down by developers, and the building stood alone in a field of rubble—with drop-dead views up and down the Bowery and all the way to the Brooklyn Bridge, the Williamsburg Bridge, and the downtown and midtown skyscrapers. It was evening, and the whole city was tinged with pinkish light, a lone jet contrail crossing overhead in a streak of brilliant orange. I yanked my phone out of my pocket—five bars. As I looked around, I thought, *What the hell?* I could finally call Dad from up here, hopefully reach him at last, if it was just a reception problem keeping me from getting through at Upchuck Manor. It was certainly illegal to be up on the roof, but the landlord sure wasn't going to be coming into the Covid-ridden city to check on his properties. With the lockdown now stretching almost two weeks, this rooftop was the only place a body could get fresh air and sun that felt halfway safe anymore. One day the developers would put up hipster glass towers, burying the Fernsby Arms in permanent shadow. Till then, though, why shouldn't it be mine? Obviously, good old Wilbur P. Worthington III had felt the same way, and he wasn't even here for lockdown.

As I scoped the place out, I immediately noted a big lumpy thing sitting out in the open, covered with a plastic tarp. I yanked it off, revealing an old mouse-chewed fainting couch in soiled red velvet—the old super's hangout, for sure. As I eased down on it to test its comfort, I thought, *God bless Wilbur P. Worthington the Third!*

I began to come to the roof every evening, at sunset, with a thermos of margaritas or some other exotic cocktail I'd scrounged up from my rainbow room of liquor, and I stretched out on my couch and watched the sun set over Lower Manhattan while I dialed Dad's number over and over again. I still couldn't reach him, but at least I got a good buzz on while trying.

My solitary paradise, such as it was, didn't last long. A couple of days ago, in this last week in March, as Covid was setting the city on fire, one of the tenants cut the lock off the door and put a plastic patio chair up there, with a tea table and a potted geranium. I was seriously cheezed. Good old Wilbur had kept a collection of locks along with his other junk, so I picked up a monstrous, case-hardened, chrome-and-steel padlock, heavy enough to split the skull of a moose, and clapped it on the door. It was guaranteed not to be cut or three times your money back. But I guess they wanted their freedom as much as I did, because someone took a crowbar to the lock and hasp and wrenched them off, cracking the door in the process. There was no locking it after that. Try buying a new door during Covid.

I'm pretty sure I know who did it. When I stepped out onto the roof after finding the busted door, there was the culprit, curled up in a "cave chair"—one of those seat things shaped like an egg covered in faux-fur that you crawl into—vaping and reading a book. It must have been hell schlepping that chair all the way up to the roof. I recognized her as the young tenant in 5B, the one Wilbur called Hello Kitty in his bible because she wore sweaters and hoodies with that cartoon character on it. She gave me a cool look, as if challenging me to accuse her of busting the door. I didn't say anything. What was I gonna say? Besides, I had to respect her a little for that. She reminded me of myself. And it's not like we had to talk to each other—she seemed as keen to ignore me as I was in ignoring her. So I kept my distance.

After that, though, other tenants began discovering the rooftop, a few at a time. They dragged their ugliest chairs up the narrow stairs and parked themselves at sunset, everyone staying "socially distanced," the new phrase du jour. I did try to stop them. I posted a sign saying that it was illegal (technically true!), that nobody was supposed to be up there, that someone could trip and fall off the low parapets. But at this point, we'd been under lockdown for what already felt like a lifetime, and people would not be barred from fresh air and a view. I can't blame them. The building is dark, cold, and drafty; the hallways have weird smells; and there are cracked and broken windows everywhere.

Besides, the rooftop feels big enough still—everyone is careful not to touch, talk loudly, or even blow their noses, and we’re all keeping six feet apart. Too bad you can’t find any hand sanitizer in this damn city, or I’d park a jeroboam of it at the door. As it is, I bleach the doorknobs once a day. And I’m not worried for myself—I’m only thirty, young enough that they say the virus won’t come for me, except for my asthma.

Still, I missed my private domain.

Meanwhile, Covid was hitting the city hard. On March 9, the mayor announced that there were sixteen cases in the city; by March 13, as I mentioned, the National Guard was surrounding New Rochelle; and on March 20, New York was shut down, just in time for everyone to binge-watch *Tiger King*. A week later, infections surpassed twenty-seven thousand, with hundreds dying every day and cases soaring. I pored over the statistics and then, fatefully, I guess, began recording them in the blank pages in the back of Wilbur’s book, his so-called *Fernsby Bible*.

Naturally, anyone who could had already left New York. The wealthy and professional classes fled the city like rats from a sinking ship, skittering and squeaking out to the Hamptons, Connecticut, the Berkshires, Cape Cod, Maine—anywhere but New Covid City. We were the left-behinds. As the super, it’s my job—or so I assume—to make sure Covid doesn’t get in here and kill the tenants at the Fernsby Arms. (Except the rent-controlled ones—ha ha, no need to bleach their doorknobs, I’m sure the landlord would have told me.) I circulated a notice laying out the rules: no outside people allowed in the building, everybody six feet apart in common areas, no congregating in stairways. And so on and so forth. Just like Dad would have done. No guidance yet from the powers that be about masks, since there aren’t enough for the healthcare workers, anyway. We are pretty much stuck in the building for the duration—locked down.

So every evening, the tenants who had discovered the roof came up and hung out. There were six of us at first. I looked them all up in *The Fernsby Bible*. There was Vinegar from 2B, Eurovision from 5C,

the Lady with the Rings from 2D, the Therapist from 6D, Florida from 3C, and Hello Kitty from 5B. A couple of days ago, New Yorkers started doing this thing of cheering the doctors and other frontline workers at seven o'clock, around sunset. It felt good to do something, and to break up the routine. So people got in the habit of gathering on the roof right before seven, and when the time rolled around, we all clapped and cheered from our rooftop along with the rest of the city, and we banged on pots and whistled. That was the start of the evening. I brought up a cracked lantern I found in Wilbur's junk, which held a candle. Others carried up lanterns and candle holders with hurricane shields—enough to create a small lighted area. Eurovision had an antique brass kerosene lantern with a decorated glass shade.

In the beginning, no one talked, and that was just fine with me. Having seen the way my dad got treated by the folks he'd lived with and helped for years, I didn't *want* to get to know them. I wouldn't even be here with them except it had been *my* space first. A super who thinks she can make friends in her building is asking for trouble. Even in a merde shed like this, everyone considers themselves above the super. So my motto is, Keep your distance. And they clearly didn't want to know me, either. Good.

Since I was new, everyone up there was a stranger. They spent their time flicking at their phones, pounding down beers or glasses of wine, reading books, smoking weed, or messing with a laptop. Hello Kitty sat herself downwind in that chair and vaped almost nonstop. I once caught a whiff of her vape smoke, and it was some sickly sweet watermelon smell. She sucked on that thing literally nonstop, like breathing. A wonder she wasn't dead. With the stories coming out of Italy of folks on ventilators, even if it's mostly old people, I wanted to smack that shit out of her hand. But we're all entitled to our vices, I guess, and besides, who's going to listen to the super? Eurovision brought up one of those miniature Bose Bluetooth speakers, where it sat next to his chair playing soft Europop. Nobody in our building ever seemed to go out, as far as I could tell, even for groceries or toilet paper. We were in full lockdown mode.

Meanwhile, because we were so close to Presbyterian Downtown Hospital, the ambulances howled up and down the Bowery, their sirens getting louder as they approached and then sinking into a dying wail as they went by. All these unmarked refrigerated trucks started showing up. We soon learned they were carrying the dead bodies of Covid victims, and they rumbled through the streets like the plague carts of old, day and night, stopping all too frequently to pick up shrouded cargo.

Tuesday, March 31—today—was a sort of milestone for me, because it was the day I started writing things down in this book. I was originally planning to just record numbers and statistics, but it got away from me and grew into a bigger project. Today's numbers were a kind of milestone: the *New York Times* reported that the city had surpassed a thousand Covid deaths. There were 43,139 cases in the city, and 75,795 in the state. In the five boroughs, Queens and Brooklyn were being trashed the most by Covid, with 13,869 and 11,160 cases, respectively; the Bronx had 7,814, Manhattan 6,539, and Staten Island 2,354. Recording the numbers seemed to domesticate them, make them less scary.

It rained in the afternoon. I got up on the rooftop as usual, about fifteen minutes before sunset. The evening light cast long shadows down the rain-slicked Bowery. In between the sirens, the city was empty and silent. It was strange and oddly peaceful. There were no cars, no horns, no pedestrians surging home along the sidewalks, no drone of planes overhead. The air was washed and clean, full of dark beauty and magical portent. Without the fumes from cars, it smelled fresh, reminding me of my short happy life in Vermont, before . . . well, anyway. The usual tenants gathered on the rooftop as the streets slipped into dusk. When seven o'clock came around, and we heard the first whoops and bangs from the surrounding buildings, we heaved ourselves out of our chairs and did the usual whistling, clapping, cheering thing—all except the tenant in 2B. She just sat there trying to get her phone to work. Wilbur had warned me about her: she was the regal type who called to get a lightbulb changed, but at least she tipped like royalty.

“She is pure native New York vinegar,” he wrote, and added one of his riddles: “The best wine doth make the sharpest vinegar.” Whatever that means. I figured she was in her fifties—dressed in all black, with a black T-shirt and faded black skinny jeans. The dribbles and splatters of paint on her well-worn Doc Martens were the only color on her. She was, I figured, an artist.

The woman in 3C, given the name of Florida in the book, called out Vinegar. “Aren’t you going to join us?” I immediately sensed from her tone that there was history between them. Florida—the old super had not explained the origin of the name, maybe that was just how she was known—was a large, big-breasted woman who managed to convey a restless energy, age about fifty, with perfect salon hair and a sequined shirt covered with a shimmering golden shawl. The bible described her as a gossip, with the quip: “Gossip is chatter about the human race by lovers of the same.”

Vinegar returned Florida’s look with a frosty one of her own. “No.”

“What you mean, no?”

“I’m tired of shouting ineffectually at the universe, thank you.”

“We’re cheering the frontline workers—the people out there risking their lives.”

“Well, aren’t you the high and holy one,” said Vinegar. “How’s yelling going to help them?”

Florida stared at Vinegar. “There’s no logic to it. Esto es una mierda, and we’re trying to show support.”

“So you think banging on a pot is going to make a difference?”

Florida pulled the golden shawl closer around her shoulders, compressed her lips in judgment, and eased herself back in the chair.

“When this is all over,” said the Lady with the Rings after a moment, “it’ll be like 9/11. Nobody will talk about it. It will be like someone who committed suicide—you never talk about them.”

“People don’t talk about 9/11,” said the Therapist, “because New York got a dose of PTSD from it. I still have 9/11 patients working through PTSD. Twenty years later.”

“What do you mean, people don’t talk about 9/11?” Hello Kitty

said. “They won’t *stop* talking about it. You’d think half of New York City was down there running for their lives, choking on the smoke and dust. It’ll be the same with this. *Let me tell you all about how I survived the Great Pandemic of Two Thousand and Twenty.* People won’t shut up about it.”

“My, my,” said Vinegar. “Were you even alive when 9/11 happened?” Hello Kitty sucked on her vape and ignored her.

“Think about all the PTSD this pandemic’s going to trigger,” said Eurovision. “Oh God, we’re going to be in analysis forever.” He gave a little laugh and turned to the Therapist. “What a windfall for you!”

She responded with a stony look.

“Everyone has PTSD these days,” Eurovision went on. “I’ve got PTSD from the cancellation of Eurovision 2020. It’s the first one I’ve missed since 2005.” He clutched his chest and made a face.

“What’s Eurovision?” Florida asked.

“The Eurovision Song Contest, darling. Singers from all over the world are chosen to compete with an original song, one singer or group per country. A winner is voted on. Six hundred million watch it on TV. It’s the World Cup of music. It was supposed to be in Rotterdam this year, but last week they canceled it. I had my plane tickets, hotel, everything. So now”—he fanned himself in an exaggerated manner—“help me, Doc, I have PTSD.”

“PTSD is not a joking matter,” said the Therapist. “And neither was 9/11.”

“Nine/eleven is still with us,” a woman in her thirties added. I recognized her from the book as Merengero’s Daughter, 3B. “It’s fresh. It touched all of us, including my family. Even back in Santo Domingo.”

“You lost someone in 9/11?” the Lady with the Rings asked, a challenge in her tone.

“In a weird way, yes.”

“How so?”

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She took a deep breath. “Mi papá was this big merengüero, which, if you don’t know, means he played merengue for a living. He used to spend a lot of his time at *El Show del Mediodía* or *The Midday Show*. If there’s one show in the Dominican Republic that everyone watches, it’s that show. In fact, it’s still on TV today.”

As she started talking, I knew she was about to launch into a story, and I had an idea. Since my early twenties, I’ve been in the habit of recording the stuff people are saying around me, especially the shit from guys who come on to me in a bar. I’d just casually leave my phone on the bar or table or in my pocket; or at other times on the subway, I’d pretend to be messing with my phone all the while recording what some jackass was saying. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve collected over the years, many glorious hours of idiocy and obnoxiousness recorded for posterity. Makes me wish I could monetize it on YouTube or something. And it’s not just the bad, actually. I’ve captured other things, too—tales of woe, funny stories, kindnesses, confessions, dreams, nightmares, reminiscences, even crimes. The things strangers will tell you late at night on the E train . . . *I once was so desperate, I smoked dog shit to get high . . . I spied on my grandparents having sex, and you wouldn’t believe what they were doing . . . I won a hundred-dollar bet by skinning, cooking, and eating my brother’s gerbil.*

My dad collected people by charm. I collected them by stealth.

Anyway, so I started recording. My couch was situated too far away from Merengüero’s Daughter, though, so I got up and, with a show of eagerness to listen, I dragged the damn red sofa through the six-foot spaces between everyone’s chairs, giving them all a big dumb grin and muttering something about not wanting to miss a single word. I made myself comfortable and slipped my phone out of my pocket, pretended to check something on it, oriented it, and hit Record. Then I casually placed it on the couch, pointing at Merengüero’s Daughter, and settled back with my feet up, margarita in hand.

What will I do with the recording? I didn’t know right in that moment when I hit Record, but later, back in my apartment, I saw Wilbur’s fat book sitting on the desk with all those blank pages he’d

left for me. *Okay, I thought, let's fill them up. It'll give me something to do while stuck in this bullshit pandemic for the next few weeks.*

But hush: Merengüero's Daughter was talking.

"Back in the day, it would feature the hottest, up-and-coming merengue bands. And by the way, some of the songs from back then had some pretty insane titles and lyrics. That's my trigger warning 'cause this is some racist shit here."

She paused and looked around the rooftop a little nervously, as if unsure of what she was about to say, but also to gauge who was listening.

"There was a song that actually asked this question: 'Qué será lo que quiere el negro?' What is it that the Black man wants? That song was a huge popular sensation in the 1980s, and it was often played on *El Show del Mediodía*, which I would watch as a little kid. I wasn't allowed to go to the studio because my dad didn't want me there, and he was working, so he couldn't watch me. Remember, he was a single father. He had to have control over me, and he didn't want me going to anything like that.

"Dad was friendly with some of the dancers on the show and met a woman there. I don't know what happened between them. They just said they were 'muy amigos y muy queridos.' I don't know, I didn't ask. But they remained friends over the years. She was always kind to me. Not like a long-lost mother figure, nothing like that, but she did teach me what to do when my blood came the summer I was eleven. I can't even imagine what my father would have done. She disappeared from our lives when I was still a kid, but I always had good memories of her.

"I happened to run into her not too long ago, a few weeks before this shutdown. It was the craziest thing. I was at my favorite salon, getting my hair pulled, you know, how they do. The joke that everyone tells us, that even in heaven, Dominican hair stylists are still doing the curl around the brush pull with one hand, while they're using the other to put who knows how many degrees of direct heat onto your hair to make it as straight as possible.

“Yeah. I used to do that to my hair every week, but then I realized that shit was whack for my hair and my head so I stopped.

“Anyway, I see her at the salon and ask how she’s been. At first, she doesn’t look happy to see me, to see anyone she knows. But then she begins this crazy story, which sounds incredible, but it’s true. The woman’s story began on September 11. Everybody was like, ‘Oh man, do we have to go back to September 11?’ It’s a lot, right? But maybe there is something in it that can teach us about the moment we find ourselves in, sitting up here on the rooftop. I call this story ‘The Double Tragedy.’

“Let me just say that when a story catches everybody’s attention in the salon, all the blow dryers stop. People can still get their hair put in curlers. They can still get color painted in. They can still get their hair cut. But if somebody has the floor and is telling a story that captures everybody’s attention, ain’t no blow drying going on. You can be sure of that.

“By the way, I have to mention, Eva was seventy years old and looked like she was fifty. She had gotten her natural gray hair blown out, but there was enough black showing through that you could tell that at one point her hair used to be phenomenally black. Now she was a distinguished kind of gray. She was also, let’s just say, a little enhanced in a few areas. And she carried it well. She made those tetas and that pa’trás look good on a seventy-year-old. Maybe that’s the way JLo is gonna look. We can only imagine. The point is, she looked hot and she was seventy years old.

“When she was in her fifties, after she had stopped hanging out at *El Show del Mediodía* and we had lost touch, she explained how she fell in love with a younger man. She did that crazy thing—she left her husband, with whom she had never been able to have a child. And she fell in love with this Dominican dude who, strangely enough, played in merengue bands. He was the percussionist, so he played a little of everything—claves, bongos, maraca, triángulo, cascabel, and yes, a percussive instrument from Peru made of dried goat nails. But he played jazzy, woke merengue, like old-school Juan Luis Guerra (before he

became born again), Victor Victor, Maridalia Hernandez, and Chichi Peralta.

“Eva said she was hit with that crazy, crazy impulse to finally start listening to her heart and not give a flying fuck. She didn’t care anymore about the thing that keeps many people in Latin America and on la isla from doing the things they want to do, which is essentially, ‘El qué dirán?’ ‘What will the neighbors say?’ Eva was like, ‘Fuck it. I don’t care. I’m in love with this dude. He plays in a band. And I’m leaving my husband.’

“Probably because they fell so deeply and madly and wildly in love, she got pregnant. It sounds unbelievable. You know, but like Eva said to the entire salon without a shred of self-consciousness, the sex was amazing. They were having sex all the time. With her husband, they just weren’t fucking, that’s all I can say. They just weren’t, they had stopped. But this guy was, I guess, around thirty and in his prime. Oh my God. How she talked about the sex! Well, it was so good that she ended up getting pregnant. That’s all I can say.”

“The hotter the sex, the faster the pregnancy,” interrupted Florida, 3C. Well, the bible had warned me she was a gossip.

“That’s scientifically bogus,” said Vinegar sharply, with a dismissive gesture. “An old wives’ tale, disproven years ago.”

“And where did you go to medical school?”

After a polite pause, Merenguero’s Daughter ignored them and went on.

“Sometimes it’s all about sex. Sometimes it’s about sex and passion. And the combination of those two things led to the miracle here. She was fifty years old, pregnant with the child of her thirty-year-old lover, now husband. Of course, she was considered scandalous. But by that time, she had already broken with ‘el qué dirán.’ Like, completely.

“And so had he. Her new husband had come from a very humble background in Santo Domingo, a neighborhood known as Villa Mella. The fact that he had made it as a musician and could provide for himself doing that was huge. He was happy. And had fallen in love with this incredible woman. They were totally nontraditional, but they

made it work. They decided early on to never ever bring the war and words from outside into their marriage.

“All of us in the salon were just glued to Eva’s story. Yo! People ordered the salon helper to go get a round of café con leche because this story was just beginning and already it was so good.

“Then Eva gets back to September 11. On that day Eva happened to be down on Wall Street for an appointment, and she saw it. She saw the plane fly right above her head and crash into the first tower. She was going to an appointment in that tower. And she happened to be one of those unlucky thousand or so people, one of the unluckiest people—or maybe one of the luckiest, depending on how you see it—who happened to be right there when it happened. She stumbled and tripped in shock, badly twisting her ankle, but the adrenaline kicked in and she started running with her busted-up ankle. All she could think about was getting home to her husband and her two-year-old son.

“That’s all she wanted to do. Get the hell out of there, jump on a subway train, and go back to Washington Heights to be with her family. Yes, here she was, the age of most grandmothers. But she was a middle-aged woman who was desperate to see her toddler son and hold him in her arms again. Smell him. Eva was able to get on the subway, but she made it by a hair. It would have been a matter of less than an hour before the entire subway system was shut down in New York City. She made it home, walked in the door, and there he was, her gorgeous husband with the clear hazel eyes and the tight curls that looked like waves in an angry ocean. His hair was dark brown, but the tips were lighter and played with the cinnamon color of his skin.

“His name was Aleximas (a name created from Alexis and Tomas, very Dominican but don’t judge, yo), and he started crying when he saw her. The tears were rolling down his cheeks, like a baby’s. Because this unconventional couple loved each other so much, it didn’t matter that he was a grown man shedding tears. That was the kind of security that Aleximas felt with his wife, twenty years his senior. She made him feel safe. Life had been really rough for him, growing up in

Villa Mella. Yeah, that was the truth. His home growing up in the DR had a dirt floor. I mean, I think that's enough said, right?

“By now everyone was sipping their cafecito. Eva continued and talked about how deeply shattered she was by what she had witnessed on September 11. So much so that she couldn't sleep.

“The doctor told her she had sprained her ankle and torn a muscle, so she had to stay at home with her leg up for several weeks. She was going stir-crazy. She was completely dependent on her husband for everything. He was going out to buy groceries. He was doing everything for her and for the family. He didn't mind shopping, or even buying her tampons. She said it was just part of their unconventional love. He was a strong, centered Dominican man who was lucky enough to find a woman who said, ‘I don't give a fuck what anybody says about me and what I do.’ Soy una de muchas mujeres as!

“Eva didn't know how to handle these new emotions. You have to remember, back in 2001, people had never really heard about PTSD. The Iraq War hadn't started. PTSD, what was this thing? She didn't realize it, but she had it. She said she couldn't get out of the depression. She'd be at home watching television, thinking about how she couldn't move her leg because she had twisted it running away in horror from the most terrible thing she had ever seen. Every time she saw images from that day on TV—it was the only story on the news anymore, and they replayed it over and over—it was like she was back there standing on the street again, and she'd start shaking and crying.

“Aleximas was actually getting worried because her nightmares were keeping the whole family up. The little baby was picking up on his mother's anxiety, and the baby wasn't sleeping either now. Just like the plane had crashed into that tower, it crashed into their home, upending their lives.

“They couldn't get out of the cycle of trauma. Together, finally, they made the difficult decision—which they knew, in the long run, was the best decision—to leave New York and go back to the Dominican Republic, back to Santo Domingo. Even though they had

essentially made it in America, enough to be able to live their dream life in New York City, in a three-bedroom railroad apartment with big windows, a living room, and a separate dining room.”

“Impossible,” muttered Florida. There were murmurs of surprise from our little circle of listeners—I couldn’t tell if it was shock at the apartment or at Florida’s interruption. But she was just warming up. “How did they afford an apartment like that? These days that’s more than three, four thousand a month! Even back then—no! And if it was rent-stabilized, they’d be crazy to leave *that* behind.”

“Seriously,” said Eurovision. “That’s amazing. These days I can barely afford this dump.”

“Let her tell the story,” said Vinegar sharply.

“Yes.” Merenguero’s Daughter was nodding. “A separate dining room on 172nd Street overlooking Fort Washington Avenue. Yeah. They were going to leave all that behind because the terror had come to their home and she couldn’t stop having nightmares.

“The plan they decided on together was that her husband and son would travel back to Santo Domingo first while she stayed behind to tie up loose ends at her work. Also, she needed the space to grieve and heal on her own, to work through her emotions without scaring her baby. She would be on her way within a month or two, at the max. And that was it. They were going to relocate to Santo Domingo and start their lives over again. They knew enough people there, things would work out.

“She looked at the flight schedules, and the soonest they could book a flight for Aleximas and their son turned out to be November 11. She was like, ‘Oh, there’s no way that I am letting my family travel on any eleventh of any month ever again. The eleventh *está quemado*. It’s cursed.’ No flight was to be booked on that date ever again. Never. So she bought the tickets for November 12, and she took her husband and their baby boy to the airport and said goodbye at JFK.

“She was a nervous wreck, but she knew that she would be able to work out her terror now that they were gone. Maybe she would

scream into a pillow three or four times a day—something she couldn't do with her two-year-old around. And can you imagine if her husband saw her do that? He would really think she'd lost it, but she *had* lost it. She was traumatized. The only thing that was stopping her from going crazy was the love and responsibility she felt for her husband and son.

“So Eva said she dropped them off at JFK and drove back to Washington Heights. She put in a CD of her husband's music, because that's what people used to do back then, and it instantly put her in a better mood. The sadness at their airport goodbye gave way to relief that she would soon have a new life away from the tragedy. She smiled and laughed and danced in her driver's seat and even got a little bit excited and wet just thinking about her husband and how she already missed him. Imagine. A grown woman feeling hot like a teenager. Ay!

“She was so blissfully unaware, lost in the first moment of happiness she'd felt in months, that she didn't hear the news. When she got back to Washington Heights, she limped into her apartment and saw that the light was blinking on the answering machine (remember, this was 2001). She hit Play and heard the voice of her husband's sister say, ‘Where is he? Where is he? How could this have happened? Why did you put them on that flight?’ Eva ran to turn on the TV, and that's when she learned that Flight 587 had crashed in Far Rockaway, Queens, ninety seconds after takeoff.

“Flight 587 was so well known in the Dominican Republic that there was even a merengue named after it. And yes, her husband had performed it. They used to play the merengue ‘El Vuelo Cinco Ochenta y Siete’ on the plane, that's how popular it was. The flight always took off early in the morning so that by the time you arrived in Santo Domingo, you could have your first almost-freezing cold beer waiting for you, sitting in ice. When beer is served that way it's called ‘dressed like a bride’ because the bottle is covered in ice. It looks like it's wearing a white dress.

“Her husband should have been drinking his beer *vestida de novia*,

but instead, he and their little boy were dead. They had died instantly on Flight 587, on November 12, 2001. They had simply wanted to avoid flying on November 11. Everybody in the salon was completely silent by now, except for one woman who was sobbing.”

Merengüero’s Daughter looked around the rooftop at all of us. We had been shocked into silence, too. Even Vinegar. I reached for my phone, thinking she was done with the story. I wished I could call my dad more than anything right then.

“Eva just said, ‘Yeah, that was my life. I lived through a double tragedy.’” Merengüero’s Daughter was shaking her head as she talked. “I wiped my nose on my shirt and asked, ‘How did you deal with it?’

“‘I didn’t,’ Eva said. ‘Well, you’re the first people that I’ve told about it. It happened twenty years ago, and I don’t talk about it. I buried whatever I could of my husband and my son. I locked up my apartment here in New York. And I moved to the Dominican Republic. No one knows who I am there or what I’ve lived through. I won’t tell you anything more about me because I don’t want you to ever find me.’ When Eva said this, she looked in my direction, and I nodded back to let her know that I wasn’t gonna reveal her.

“She looked at the women gathered around us in the beauty salon as if in defiance: ‘I don’t care what you think. A mí no me importa el qué dirán. I don’t care what anybody thinks about my life or my choices or what I do to deal with my double tragedies. Y así fue, y así es la vida,’ Eva added and then turned to her hair stylist. ‘Termina mi peinado, por favor.’ Finish my blowout.

“When the stylist was finished, this seventy-year-old woman left her stylist a twenty-five-dollar tip and walked out.

“I don’t know. What’s the lesson?”

On the roof, no one spoke. Merengüero’s Daughter paused, as if waiting for an answer, then shrugged again.

“Denial. Basically, denial worked for her. She compartmentalized to a point where she just told herself, I’m not even going to think about it anymore. Later on I found out Eva does indeed have a whole new life in the Dominican Republic. She did not remarry, but she has

multiple suitors who call on her and treat her like a queen. Which basically means she's getting some as often as she wants.

"So what do we do? You know, for some of us, we're living through multiple tragedies: people losing family members, their jobs, their homes, their careers, and in some cases, their entire family. A lot of people are in denial. But they're the ones who keep making us sick, and I'm sick of them. Here's what I think—a little bit of denial goes a long way, but a lot of denial goes too far. *Y colorín colorado, este cuento se ha acabado.*"

Merengüero's Daughter turned to Eurovision. "Dude," she said, "put on some merengue now. I gotta dance this double tragedy away. Put on 'Ojalà Que Llave Café.' I want it to rain coffee."

"Who, me?" Eurovision asked, taken by surprise.

"You're the one with the speakers."

"Of course, of course." Eurovision quickly straightened himself up and rose, fiddling with his phone. "How, um, do you spell that song title? Spanish is not one of my languages."

She spelled it out. He tapped away and then stood up. "Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Juan Luis Guerra live, singing 'Ojalà Que Llave Café!'"

I'd never heard it before. The music was soft and longing, not the pulsating beat I'd expected. When it was over, a hush had fallen.

"That didn't sound like merengue to me," said Vinegar.

"That's because it really isn't," said Florida. "That's bachata."

"Bachata *is* a kind of merengue," said Merengüero's Daughter, flaring up.

"Just saying."

"Can you translate for us?" asked Eurovision.

"Ay hombre," said Merengüero's Daughter, "it's a Dominican harvest song. A prayer. It's about hoping the harvest will be good and that the farmers won't suffer. But it's more than that. It's about a simple life