

Ars Gratia Artist

Brian Allan Skinner

New York City smells like a bucket of dirty mop water. The snow is clean until it touches something, then each unique flake becomes the identical dingy gray of November. Back home in Red Willow, New Mexico, snow remains dazzling until it melts. But it wasn't the climate that lured me to the Big Apple. Nor was it the attraction of fame and fortune. Quite simply, the little fish had grown cramped in his little pond and needed to flip his fins.

A cold drizzle has turned to light snow, invisible except for the nimbuses around the streetlamps. I'm looking for a quirky restaurant on Avenue A called the *Café Kundalini*. A friend told me it has this strange art exhibit in which the watercolors, all of clouds, morph into other shapes and colors. I don't believe him, of course, but I'd like to know what's really going on. It intrigues me. Maybe it's something I can imitate.

I see their neon sign at the end of the next block, at Eleventh Street. A windless snow squall washes everything away in a wave of white. I can barely see my gloved hand. I look behind me, no longer sure where I'm headed. My footprints have filled in; the world has fallen away. I pull up my collar and proceed, taking small steps. People rush past, featureless as ghosts, trailing swirls of snow behind them.

The *Café* at last appears, not by sight, but by its cloud of aromas. Even if the exhibit stinks, the meal will likely reward my traveling from way the hell uptown on Riverside Drive. I turn left, nearly smacking into their steamed-up windows. It is crowded. I grab the brass door handle in the shape of a human hand, and the door swings open. Snow has frosted my sandy hair and eyebrows.

"Good evening, Mr. Thorson. Your table is right this way."

The maitre d' is a skinny fellow who wears a red jacket with white trim. He resembles a bad imitation of a bad Santa Claus, complete with long white chin whiskers.

"How do you know me and how'd you know I was coming?" I ask.

"You are a famous artist, sir. I have seen your picture. And if you come to a restaurant in the evening, it is likely you've come for supper. Please, have a seat. My name is Nicolás."

His explanation makes sense. I ask to see the menu.

"No need, sir. I know what you want."

"You do, huh?"

I am distracted by the snow piling up at the curb. The waiter has vanished.

A shallow oval bowl appears in front of me with two *chile rellenos*, a taste of home I'd craved for months but could not find made the right way here in New York. The waiter bows and returns to the kitchen. The *rellenos* are excellent, made properly with poblano peppers and as savory as any I'd find in dusty old Red Willow. I was missing the place more than I'd realized.

Looking up after another mouthful, I am drawn to the artwork on the walls, each one, as my friend had described, a cloudscape well-executed in watercolors. They are small, but incredibly forceful. In one, depicting an ominous anvil-shaped thunderhead, I think I see a flash of lightning. Must be a reflection from the street, except that it is still snowing, harder than ever. It looks as though someone has painted the windows white.

I return to the art. The thunderhead has moved in the frame. Its leading edge, of slanting rain and lightning, has moved into the next picture frame on the opposite side of the doorway to the kitchen. The other watercolors have changed in subtle ways, too. The Tibetan brass bell over the front door jangles. My waiter walks in and stamps his feet on the floor to shake off the snow. I did not see him go out. He looks like a Santa, albeit a weird, skinny one.

The watercolors pull me in one direction and the delicious aromas of my *rellenos* in another, each too powerfully to allow split allegiance. I nibble in between long stretches absorbed in the artwork, drawn to it and into it as though mesmerized or on some sort of drug. I wonder if there's something in the food that's making this happen.

"Certainly not, Mr. Thorson," Nicolás says, standing at my elbow. "It is powerful work, is it not?"

I nod, and glance back at the painting.

"Would you care to meet the artist, sir?"

"Is he here tonight?" I ask.

"Indeed he is, sir. Just one minute, please."

The funny little waiter turns and goes into the kitchen, emerging a moment later with a tray on which sits a red napkin. He sets the tray before me and lifts the napkin. There is a round mirror which he holds up to me. It startles me to see my face so changed. My hair is thinner and grayer. Lines at the corners of my eyes and mouth nearly connect. But my eyes are brilliant blue and piercing I look up at Nicolás for an explanation.

"Your work is on loan to us by Six Thorson from ten years hence. That is when you will do your best work. You will stop fooling people and create from deep within you. That is why the work has such tremendous energy and does not remain static. It is alive."

“Everything is appearances,” I tell him, “all on the surface, skin deep, a coat of paint., a whore’s rouge. There’s not much else, I’m afraid.”

Nicolás scowls. I look away and consult my phone. It is nearly midnight. Where had two hours gone? My agent has sent a half-dozen frantic messages.

I pay my check and stand at the glass entrance door, dismayed by the featureless landscape, the frozen wasteland of Siberia that has descended on New York City.

“Your cab is here, Mr. Thorson.”

I cower into my jacket and dash out the door. There is no snow to be seen, not one flake. The pavement is damp with drizzle and light fog. It is the City in November. I open the door of the cab and slide onto the seat.

I have a reverie all the way home, the first wisps and whispers of my next series of paintings, the very thing my agent has been exhorting me to develop for months. It will surpass my most brilliant work, “Locked Gallery.” No one was admitted to the exhibit, and still the critics swooned and fawned. I wonder what makes me tilt toward Expressionism in the future. Or maybe that little display at *Café Kundalini* was mere artifice.

* * *

My agent, Sol, was not thrilled by the concept of “Art Without Boarders,” though when I mentioned hiring a Lesbian Hispanic crew from The Bronx to execute the work, his face brightened. He approved of inclusiveness as long as there were no white men.

“Good publicity,” he said.

“You know all the promo materials have the title of the exhibit misspelled.”

“Really?” Sol remarked.

“The exhibit is not advertising rooms to let. There is no *A* in *Borders*. ”

“Well, then it neatly sidesteps any trademark infringement issues, doesn’t it?”

“The man with an answer for everything. When’s the world going to end, Sol?”

“When no one’s looking,” he replied.

“Then I’m afraid it already has.”

* * *

"You know how nervous it makes me, Six, when we get this close to our opening and I see no indication that anything is going on," my agent says.

We stand at the center of the sixty-by-sixty foot space, made into a sixty-foot circle by means of curved panels. One sliding panel forms the doorway. Everything—walls, floor, and ceiling—are pure white.

"But it's finished, Sol, all ready for Friday night," I tell him.

"When will the paintings arrive?"

"They're here, Sol, all hung and ready to go, all of them white and featureless, as we discussed. No doubt the house painters who did the work brushed and rolled in no consistent pattern, so there are small differences of texture from panel to panel."

"But how will anyone know where the art ends and the walls, the room, begin? There are no frames, no edges, no borders," Sol complains.

"Exactly. That's the whole concept, remember?"

"Yes, but I thought there'd be some way to distinguish the individual works besides microscopic textural differences."

"There is: the placards beside each painting with title and catalogue number: *Untitled 1*, *Untitled 2*, *Untitled 3*, et cetera."

"What if a patron or collector wishes to purchase a work? What will we do?"

"Ask them where they'd like to display the art and then send The Bronx painting crew to their house with the bucket of white paint and a roller. Simple enough."

Sol has been fingering every inch of the walls looking for the panel that slides open, looking for his way out, but it's too late. He's already signed off on the whole concept. He has no say in the execution of my artwork. He wags his head.

"I don't know, Six," he says. "What are the critics going to say? How many times can you punk them and still have them on your side?"

"I'll let you worry about that, Sol. You're so much better at it."

I touch the tiny gray dot, the finger hole between the first and last works of art, and slide the panel open. His sigh is audible.

"I thought we'd never get out of there," Sol says. "I felt like I was in a blizzard."

I put my hand on his shoulder and thank him for at last getting the gist of this installation. He hasn't a clue what I mean, just as it should be.

* * *

I do not usually care what the public or critics think of my work. I haven't actually drawn or painted anything since coming to New York ten years ago. My studio is as sterile as an operating room, yet I am hailed and emulated. You can't fool anyone unless they're willing to be fooled. You can't lie to anyone who doesn't want to be lied to, and they are complicit in the lie.

This exhibit feels different, as though there were more riding on its reception than I realize. I've been unable to keep anything down since cold cereal at breakfast. My stomach is in knots. Sol is annoyingly chatty and optimistic. I send him on a fool's errand for some kosher bacon for the wrapped shrimp to get him out of my hair. I don't care when he gets back.

Over and over my thoughts return to my work of the future, the series of cloud pictures. That weird waiter played on my mind. I may return to *Café Kundalini* just to let him know I do not buy into his lie, or trick, or fantasy, or whatever it is. I detest Expressionism.

I pace the exhibit in circles, first one way and then, I think, the other. It's hard to tell. I am lost. I'd be even more lost without Sol. I wish I hadn't sent him away. I have an idea and the show opens in an hour.

At last I hear the freight elevator. Sol returns empty-handed. I forget what I sent him for.

"I found kosher bacon *and* shrimp. I took it to the caterers on the third floor," he reports.

I doubt there is any such thing, but I am not Jewish. I defer to Sol. Of far more importance is my idea.

"I want all the works in this show, each of the white spaces on the wall, to have the same title: *Untitled 1*. I want to give my viewers nothing. The less I show them, the more they see."

"By tonight?" Sol asks.

I nod and he is off. I know he'll get the title changes done in time. I don't know what I'd do without Sol.

* * *

I stand at the video monitor in the gallery office watching the attendees milling about and consulting their catalogues. All of the pages look the same—white, blank. Sol looks at his

clipboard and points to the screen. I know he has gotten useful tips from the doorman, who knows every B-list celebrity and higher by sight, regardless of disguises.

“Is that a nun?” I ask. “She’s perfect in that black habit. A crow in the snow.”

“Benedictine,” Sol replies.. “Sister Hildegard von Binghamton, from Upstate New York. You may think she’s taken a vow of poverty, but not Sister Hildegard. She’s a famous astronomer and makes millions off her popular books. She’s a friend of Stephen Hawking. Her habit is silk and her high-clopper shoes custom from Gucci.”

“How do you know all this, Sol?”

“It pays to know.”

“Yeah, I guess. And what about the two biker dudes? More black on white. A pair of crows.”

“Don’t have their last names, but they are Jake and Antonio, boyfriends, a gay couple, whatever you call it. My contact will say only that Antonio is about to come into pots of moolah from an inheritance. They can afford you.”

“Good. I dislike freeloaders. They’ve been raiding the refreshments table like their legs are hollow, making a meal of it. And who’s the fellow in the expensive suit, the fat crow?”

“It’s probably a cheap suit. That’s Biggs, no first name. He’s actually Biggs IV, from a long line of New York robber-baron philanthropists. He’s chairman and CEO of the Vorax Corporation. Easily a multi-billionaire. Rumors say he’s scouting locations for a museum to bear his name and logo. Wouldn’t hurt to get a work or two of yours in there, Six.”

“Let’s get upstairs, Sol. Stalling makes me nervous. I want to overhear what they’re saying about me.”

Sol continues chattering in the echoic stairwell about who else he has seen or who is rumored to be coming. I haven’t a clue who most of them are. They could not interest me less as long as they continue to support me. And their investment in my work has not hurt them, either.

“...and the van Burens, and a state Supreme Court judge...”

“Sol, please, enough. You lost me at the bottom of the stairs. Just stay at my elbow and remind me who they are.”

We enter through the open panel. No one looks in our direction. My flowered Nehru jacket, striped trousers, reflective sunglasses, and multi-colored beads have thrown them all off

the scent until I am ready to reveal myself. Another of Sol's wicked ideas. An older couple and an even older matron rush me like I was the sale counter at Macy's.

"Mr. Thorson. Perhaps you don't remember..."

My disguise has fooled no one, it appears. Sol leans into my ear.

"Charles and Helen van Buren, Upper West Side collectors. Big-time. Own three of your works. In the company of Zelda Popper, art adviser and procurer to the stars. Be nice."

"Of course I remember you, Mrs. von Schmeltznik. Thanks for coming," I tell her.

"I'd say you were trying to insult your viewers," Zelda Popper intones. She and the pug under her arm both snuffle, and then she and her clients turn away.

Sol rushes in to save me. He takes hold of my elbow, guiding me like a tugboat through crowded waters. He whisks me to the other side of the round refreshments table.

"Dr. Egad De Bockel, world-famous Dutch-Israeli psychiatrist. Owns two of your works, from the all-black series: *Nighttime in an Inkwell Nos. 1 and 2*. Mention his latest book."

He rushes the doctor before I can ask him the title of the book. The doctor has a completely white head of hair and full beard. His head disappears in front of my artwork. Sol extends his hand to him and pulls me closer.

"Dr. De Bockel. Good evening. We were just discussing *We're All OK*, weren't we, Six?"

"Complete tripe," I say, "with a dash of drivel."

"I have never been so insulted," Dr. De Bockel huffs and sputters.

"Then I'd say it was about time, wouldn't you, Sol?"

The scowl on Sol's face has brought several wrinkles out of retirement. He mouths something to me, but I do not understand. He pulls me right in front of my work, *Untitled 1*.

"What's the matter, Six? You're not yourself tonight."

"Or maybe tonight I *am* myself."

"Let's hope not."

I find myself next in front of the banker/industrialist Biggs IV. Despite his bulk, he is surrounded by two even beefier bodyguards in matching sharkskin suits, a pair of shiny crows.

Biggs says nothing. His eyes narrow. He turns and spits at the wall. Spittle dribbles down *Untitled 1*. The two bodyguards close behind him like steel elevator doors. Sol whirls me around.

“I was afraid this would happen,” he tells me, wrinkling his forehead. “We went too far.”

“I’m surprised it didn’t happen a dozen exhibits ago. Remember *Painters’ Strike*, all empty frames and all of ‘em eventually sold?”

My dear agent laughs.

“That’s the spirit, Sol. We had a good run.”

I pat him on the back and urge him toward the fellow in what looks like judicial robes. I learn he is wearing a plain black kaftan and *namaz* hat, an observant crow.

“Allow me to introduce you to Judge Basim Fastidi of the New York State Supreme Court.”

He looks Middle Eastern, brown skin and dark, curly hair. We bow to each other.

“So how does a Muslim get on the Supreme Court?” I ask, guessing he’s Moslem.

“By upholding the law,” he replies, smiling. “How does an artist get to be famous and sought after without painting anything?”

“It is all appearances, Your Honor, a coat of paint. I show the nothingness underneath, the emptiness at the heart of reality.”

“Do you truly believe that, Mr. Thorson, or have your handlers taught you to say that?” he asks, glancing at Sol.

“Bingo, Judge. Now I know why you’re on the Supreme Court. I’ll see you around.”

Sol bows to Judge Fastidi and urges me on. I recognize the next fellow. His face is plastered on every screen and billboard in New York. He is Lance Parker, thirty-eight-year-old skateboarding champ. He introduces us to his attorney, Mr. Juan de Crisco, Esq., who accompanies him everywhere to make sure there are no infringements of his client’s copyrights or trademarks. He informs me my exhibit is “clean.”

“Is that so?” I say, snatching the pen from his jacket pocket. I make Lance’s trademark *X* on the wall. He is purported to be unable to read and write, the perfect role model for the generations that emulate him. I mark each of my works with *X*s, no two alike, some large, some small. There are gasps; everyone turns around to look. I hear someone ask, “Is this performance art?”

“Your people will be hearing from me in the morning, Mr. Thorson.”

“Sol is the only *people* I’ve got,” I tell Mr. de Crisco. “And if I fire him, there’ll be no one to answer the phone.”

Sol turns around to make sure I’m only kidding. He hastens off to lasso another patron. Lance Parker touches my sleeve and asks to have a word with me, out of earshot of his attorney.

“I am assumed to have oatmeal between my ears because of how I earn my living. That is Sister Hildegard von Binghamton across from us. I read her paper on *Directional Factors Pertaining to the Gamma Ray Bursts of Wolf-Rayet Hypernovae*. Perhaps that doesn’t make me smart, but it does indicate I have interests outside my chosen field. What I am wondering, if you are considered such a clever artist, and your work so profound, is the opposite perhaps true? Are you, as Ezra Pound put it, a Hollow Man, Mr. Thorson?”

“I’ll have to get back to you on that later, Lance, old pal,” I tell him, thumping my chest.

I watch him leave the exhibit. I haven’t a single friend or advocate in the entire place. They’re saying, *We’re not buying it*, literally and figuratively. They all hate me and they hate my work.

“Not everyone, Mr. Thorson.”

It is a fellow in a striped shirt, the delivery guy from *ESPizza*. The caterer was told to call them if they were running out of finger food.

“I like your work, Mr. Thorson, though I am more impressed by the concept than the execution. I’d rather read a paragraph or two about your concept than have to actually sit, or stand, through it. Here. This one is yours.”

He takes a small cardboard pizza box from the stack and hands it to me, then goes off distributing the others among the gallery attendees. I learn from Sol he is Oscar Diggs, the owner and proprietor of *ESPizza*. *We know what you want™*. The claim is that Oscar Diggs is a wizard who knows what toppings you want before you know it yourself. He has the steaming pizza at your door within a minute or two of your thinking about it.

My personal pizza is exactly what I was craving, topped with red and green chiles, refried beans, lots of cheddar, avocado, and black olives. Sol’s pizza is marked, “Kosher. Really.” It’s loaded with anchovies, tuna, salmon, and enough garlic to repel every vampire in Hollywood. Judging by the reactions of the other patrons in the gallery, Mr. Diggs has scored more direct hits. Can he really read minds? I want to know if this is legit.

“Of course it is, Mr. Thorson,” Oscar Diggs says, standing at my shoulder. “Mind reading is a small talent, But it makes people happy and it pays my rent. How about you?”

“I am always behind on paying my expenses despite the ridiculous amount of money I make peddling empty frames. And it does not make me happy to...”

I stop myself, wondering why I am telling this to a stranger.

Because you have no one to confide in. You are alone and lonely.

Diggs is talking right inside my head. I answer him back.

I am also afraid, I think at him.

Because of the new path you are setting out on?

Yes, I think. I want to give all this up and go back home, back to New Mexico.

“It is the right choice, Mr. Thorson,” he says aloud. “You will make yourself and many other people happy. Your life will be a success.”

Oscar Diggs smiles at me and, after seeing that everyone is sated, winds his way to the entrance. Now that they have been fed, a good many of the patrons of art rush out with him, just short of a stampede. The nun, the two bikers, the Muslim judge, and some scraggly fellow too thin to cast a shadow remain. Yes, and good old reliable Sol, who has promised to fire himself after tonight. He wants to move to Florida and take up miniature golf. “Gotta start small,” he says.

The dark-haired biker, Antonio, asks to have a word with me.

“Did you intend the spelling as *Art Without Boarders*, Mr. Thorson, or was it a mistake?”

Leave it to a couple of homos to know their homonyms. They laugh as though they, too, have homed in on my thoughts.

“It was a mistake,” I admit. “I did not care enough about my own work to even glance at the designs being sent to the printer.”

“Kind of empty and sad without boarders, don’t you think?” the other biker, Jake, asks.

I shrug, but must admit my work is rather vacant. There is certainly nothing of me in it.

“I’d like to introduce you to my cousin,” blond-haired, blue-eyed Jake says to me.

I assume he means the scrawny fellow who scribbles something in his notebook before each painting—but I was wrong.

We stand before the nun, who is drinking from two glasses of red wine: a real two-fisted drinker. I actually remember her name and preempt both Sol and the gay bikers.

“Sister Hildegard. No, I have not read your book, I’m afraid. None of them. I flunked math and science.”

“Well, that’s refreshing,” she says, raising both glasses to me. One is already empty. “I don’t believe a single person ever told me that, Mr. Thorson.”

“Does everybody in the joint know who I am?” I ask Sol. “What good are disguises? I might as well be comfortable then.”

I unbutton the top of my Nehru jacket and strip off the long-haired wig. Sister Hildegard offers another toast: *To Authenticity*.

“Care for some wine?” she asks me.

The nun pours two glasses of spring water, handing one to me. It turns a deep red. I take a sip. It is a very good merlot.

“One of my odd little talents. But at least I express it. You are hiding yours, Mr. Thorson, under layers of gimmickry and tomfoolery. I at least expected a couple of witty titles: *Sheep in the Blizzard*, *Blackboard Negative*. But you are stingy, stingy with yourself. Be who God made you, Mr. Thorshon,” she says, sloshing her syllables, “and share yourshelf.”

Sister Hildegard refills our glasses from the bottled water, and it all turns into wine. Antonio and Jake act as though everything is hilarious. They punch each other on the arm for emphasis. The skinny guy moseys over and introduces himself as a Goth Beat poet.

“My name is Edgar Allen Ginsberg. Perhaps you’ve heard of me.”

I and the entire group shake our heads. I feel bad for Edgar. I may not have an ounce more talent than he does, but at least I am well-known.

There seems to be no end to the amount of wine Sister Hildegard pours from her water bottle. The wine is strong, and I feel it coursing through my brain. The bikers are hanging on each other, less out of affection, it seems, than for steadiness. I hope they came in a cab and not on their Harleys. The poet tries inserting himself into whatever shred of conversation is initiated. The wine has loosed his tongue, too. The only clear-headed person in the room is the observant Muslim, Judge Fastidi.

As I watch, he holds up an empty glass to Sister Hildegard, who fills it with water that quickly turns into wine. He dips two fingers in the wine and flicks the drops of wine over his shoulder before taking a sip. I ask him the meaning of this custom.

"The Holy Koran states, 'The first drops of wine shall be thine undoing.' So I discard the first drops and imbibe only those that follow."

"Here! Here!" Sister Hildegard shouts.

Antonio and Jake support themselves by leaning against the wall, their elbows touching *Untitled 1*. The poet is reciting to them. I see the tiny spots and dribbles of wine from Judge Fastidi on *Untitled 1* behind him. Sister Hildegard refills my glass. I move to the other side of the room, away from everyone, and, with a sweeping motion of my arm, splash the entire glass of merlot across several of the paintings. The room falls silent.

"I told you he was a performance artist," Jake tells his boyfriend.

Edgar Allen Ginsberg pipes in with, "A slashed wrist is the first brushstroke of Expressionism. The purpose of life is to die."

I daub and splash at the walls as fast as Sister Hildegard can refill my glass. She quickly gets into the spirit. It has been years since I had this much fun, maybe since coming to New York. I certainly have not felt this connected to my work since leaving Red Willow. The nun seems not to care about spilling red wine on her black habit, but the other spectators stand back.

Though I have no idea what I am creating, it feels important to me, as though I cannot turn away from what I've begun. All the white is covered. At first it looks to me like the scene of a slaughter, but then the gaudy Rorschachs seem to unfold themselves, revealing new interpretations. I face my dedicated patrons who stayed with me until the end.

They begin fading like old photographs, the color leached away by time and forgetting. They nod approvingly, but when they speak I cannot hear them. Soon they are far away, beyond the horizon, lost in the vanishing point, until I can no longer see them at all

I face the wall. My work, too, is fading, the wine reverting to water a drop at a time, and evaporating. The walls are white again. I see nothing. White, white, white, like a blizzard. My aloneness is palpable.

A hand rests on my shoulder, a bony hand. I jump, and turn around. It is the strange waiter from *Café Kundalini*, dressed in his red jacket with white trim. We now stand at the door to the restaurant in the East Village. He bows and, with his eyes, directs me to look outside. A true blizzard has descended on the city, a white-out, though it is not a solid white. I notice the texture of swirls and eddies and arabesques. The weird waiter clears his throat.

"It is said each writer has a stable of six characters. All others are variations on one of the six. You are Number Six, the artist, the creator. I am Number One, Santa Nicolás, the giver and teacher."

“And who are the others?” I ask.

“I think you know them, Six, but I shall tell you. Sister Hildegard von Binghamton is your spiritual self, the priest, or priestess in this case. Oscar Diggs, the owner of *ESPIzza*, is the wizard, the magician. He is Number Three. Number Four is the judge, His Honor Basim Fastidi, the part of you endowed with wisdom. Number Five are the bikers Antonio and Jake, who are both friends and lovers. You have your own special friend back in Red Willow.”

“And who is that?”

“Who else, Six? It is Hypatia.”

I laugh. “I doubt she is still waiting for me, Nicolás. It’s been ten years.”

“Love makes us do such impossible things,” the teacher says, looking into my eyes. “If you believe she has forgotten you, then that is how it will be. But I like to think Hypatia is waiting for you to return. Look. Isn’t that her? Remember, it can be anybody you want, Six.”

He points out the steam-shrouded door to a shadowy figure crossing Avenue A. The teacher’s fingertip touches the glass and a clear dribble descends to the bottom of the door. I see it’s Hypatia through that narrow sliver of clarity in the foggy glass. Nicolás opens the door and I step outside into the swirling snow. He hands me a small package, what feels like a book. I thank him, bowing, and walk towards Hypatia. A squall of snow conceals her.

I stand now on the flagstone walkway to Hypatia’s house in Red Willow, the one she inherited from her parents. It’s also the place I’d called home for five years—before I left for New York. She stands at the front door in a thin sweater, hugging herself. She locked herself out.

“How long have you been standing there, Hypatia? You look frozen.”

“About ten years.”

We laugh.

“You wouldn’t still happen to have your key somewhere, would you, Six?”

I reach into the pocket of my jeans and hand her my key ring. She opens the door and we rush into the kiva to the fireplace. I look at her, the flames dancing in her eyes, her blonde hair shimmering.

“You wouldn’t still happen to have that object made of malachite I gave you before I left, would you?” I ask her, grinning.

Hypatia puts her hand into her jeans pocket and produces the polished green ring.

“Maybe it’s time we put it to good use,” I suggest.

She smiles. “How about tomorrow?”

“Christmas Eve? Who’d we get to officiate on such short notice?”

“My parents’ old shaman, the guy I used to call ‘Weird Santa’ when I was a girl. He’ll do, if you’re not fussy. He’s registered with the State of New Mexico.”

I realize she must be talking about Nicolás. He’s probably folded up origami-style somewhere inside my bag.

“I’m not fussy,” I tell her, “except about who I decide to spend my life with.”

Hypatia puts her arms around my neck and pulls me closer. She feels warmer to me than the fire. My bones ache to lie next to her.

* * *

Hypatia finds me in her back garden, collecting meltwater from the icicles dangling from the *portalo*.

“You’ve opened a present early,” she scolds. “*Techniques of Watercolor?*”

“Yes,” I tell her. “It’s from Nicolás, my teacher. He wanted me to open it as soon as I got home.”

“Are you home, Six?”

“Yes,” I say, giving her a kiss. “And the book suggested I collect water for the pigments from a natural source like a brook, or waterfall, or a thunderstorm. At the moment, this is the only unfrozen water in Red Willow.”

We hear a clattering in the kiva, like someone coming down the chimney. We find a sooty Nicolás standing at the hearth, his grin and eyeballs the only parts still white.

“Dearly beloved,” he intones, and takes hold of our hands.

Hypatia and I look at each other. Her smile lights up her face, and probably mine, too.