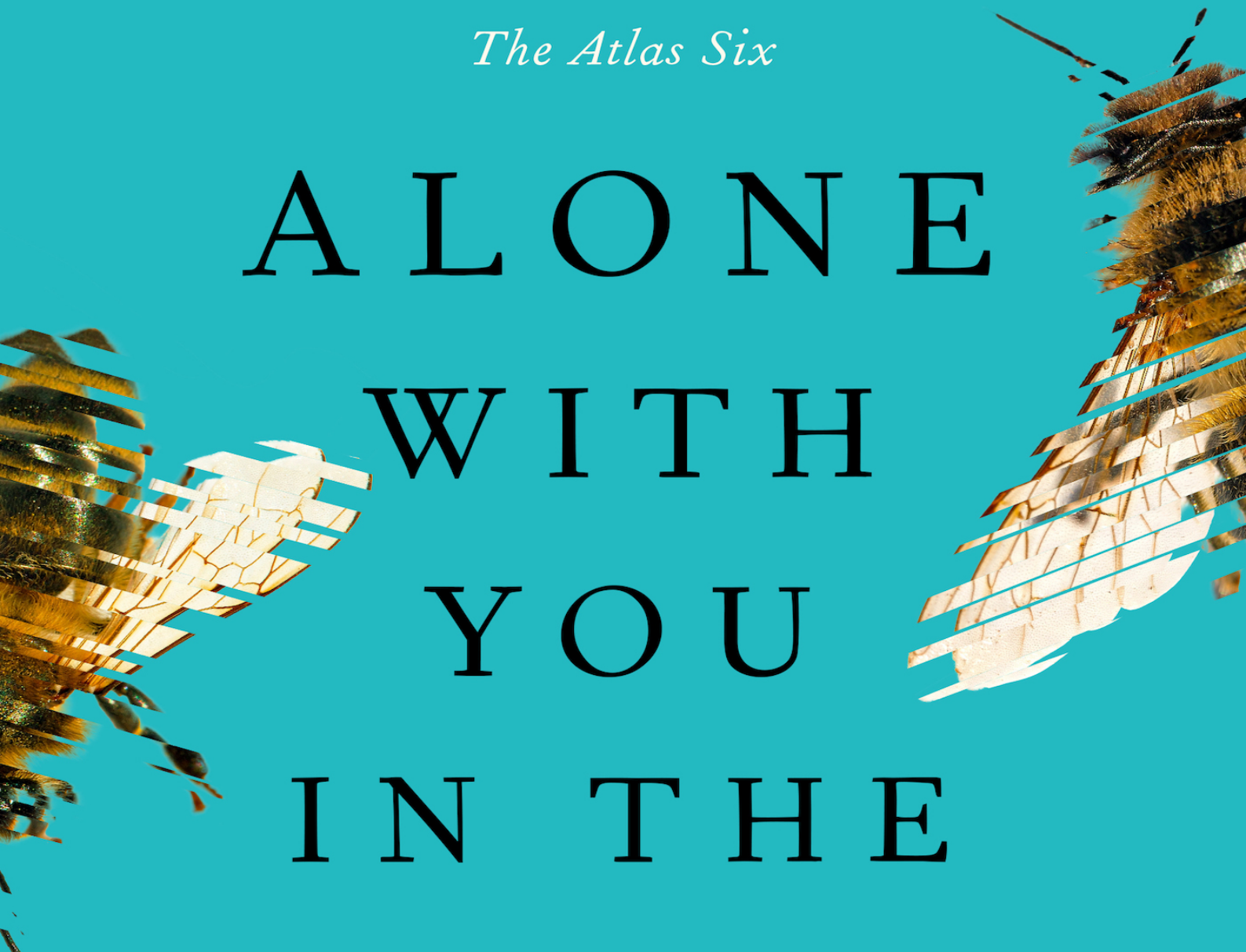


OLIVIE BLAKE

New York Times BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
The Atlas Six



ALONE
WITH
YOU
IN THE
ETHER

A LOVE STORY

ALONE WITH YOU IN THE ETHER

OLIVIE BLAKE



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to the old you,
from the old me

a hypothesis

THERE WOULD BE TIMES, particularly at first, when Regan would attempt to identify the moment things had set themselves on a path to inevitable collision. Moments had become intensely important to Regan, more so than they had ever been. Considering it was Aldo who had altered the shapes and paths of her thinking, it was probably his fault that she now considered everything in terms of time.

Her own hypothesis was fairly elementary: There was a single moment responsible for every sequence thereafter. Regan wasn't the science enthusiast Aldo was—and certainly not the genius he was, either—but her view of causality was methodical enough. Everything was a consequence that rippled out from some fixed point of entry, and it had become a game of hers (probably stolen from him) to expose the genesis from which everything else had sprung.

Had it begun the moment Aldo met her eye? Was it when he said her name, or when he told her his? Had it been the moment she'd told him Get up, you can't sit there, or did it have nothing to do with him at all? Could even that moment have been the product of something begun days, weeks, even lifetimes prior?

With Regan, everything came down to sacredness. She liked, in the time between docent tours, to wander her favorite parts of the Art Institute, which she typically selected to match the religiosity of her moods. Which was not to say she gravitated to religious art specifically; more often she aimed to match her private longings with the god (who was sometimes God, but not always) being worshipped through a polished frame. In early Catholic paintings, she looked for awe. In modern work, for sleekness. In contemporary, the vibrancy of dislocation. Deities themselves had changed over time, but the act of devotion had not. That was the torment of it, of art, and the perpetual idolatry of its creation. For every sensation Regan could conjure, there was an artist who had beautifully suffered the same.

The wandering was a foregone conclusion—a constant, as Aldo would say—but the armory, that day, was not. When Regan had chosen to visit the armory in the past it had been because it stood for the sacredness of purpose: there was no frivolity here. Instead there was the irony of peace; empty shells of weaponry, garish red walls, fossils of conquest. It reminded her of a time when people still committed their violence eye to eye, which gave her a paradoxical sense of gratification. It was intimate because it was not. It was religious because it was not. It was beautiful because, at the heart of it, it was twisted and soulless and ugly, and therefore it mirrored something masochistic in Regan herself.

Her choice of the armory that day implied Significance; it had the ripple effect of Consequence, cosmically so. But then what had been the cause? Had she met Aldo there because fate had willfully intervened, or because they already possessed such similar forms of rumination? Was it inevitable, god descending from machine, or was it because she had been vacant where he was vacant, and therefore both would inevitably seek to be filled?

Did it matter where it started, and would it matter where it would end? Either yes, it mattered very much, because everything was a consequence of something and therefore what became of them was somehow predetermined, or no, it did not matter at all, because beginnings and endings were not as important as the moments that could have happened or the outcomes that might have been. Either it was everything to know the whole story, to look back and see the shape of it while standing along its periphery; or it was nothing, because things in their entirety were less fragile and therefore less beautiful than the pieces within the frame.

By the end, Regan would know the answer. Having turned a corner from where she'd been, she would come to recognize that it was less a question of when everything had happened and more a surrendering to when there had been no turning back. It was always a matter of time in the end, just as it had been in the beginning.

Because for once, in a moment that was either everything or nothing, there would be someone else in Regan's universe, and from there everything would be as it was, only very slightly different.

part one, before.

THE DAY BEFORE was nothing special. It was special only because of how unspecial it was, or perhaps by how unspecial it would very soon become. Things were always stranger in retrospect, which was a funny little consequence of time.

Aldo, who was called less frequently by his surname, Damiani, and even less commonly by his birth name, Rinaldo, had rolled a joint five minutes prior to his episode of silent meditation. He was twirling it between his fingers, staring into nothing.

SCENE: The air that afternoon has the crisp, weatherless quality that only happens in Chicago for about a week in mid-September. The sun is bright overhead, and the leaves on the tree above him are mostly undisturbed.

ACTION: Aldo raises the joint to his lips, saturating the cigarette paper.

The joint was unlit, because he was thinking. He'd come out to this park to sit on this bench to solve something, and he had been sitting there for ten minutes, thinking for nine and a half, rolling for four and now fake-smoking for a good thirty seconds. Muscle memory, Aldo had always thought, was the key to unlocking any door that wouldn't open. The act of solving something was, for him, as superstitious as anything.

ALDO glances at the audience. Noticing nothing amiss, he looks away.

The mechanics of his ritual were simple: Raise the joint to his lips, breathe in, breathe out, let his hand fall. This was the formula. Formulas he understood. He brought the joint to his lips, inhaled, and exhaled into nothing.

A BREEZE slides through the leaves overhead.

Aldo's right thumb beat against his thigh, percussive to the rhythm of Grieg's *In the Hall of Mountain King*

CUE SOUNDTRACK.

which then infected the rest of his fingers. They drummed against the threading of his jeans, impatient, while his left hand continued the motion of faux-smoking.

Aldo was thinking about quantum groups. Specifically, hexagons. It was Aldo's firm belief that the hexagon was the most significant form in nature, not purely because of his fondness for the *Apis*—commonly known as the honeybee—but not entirely unrelated. Many people were typically unaware how many kinds of bees there were. The bumblebee was slow and stupid enough to be petted, which was sort of sweet, though not quite as interesting.

THE NARRATOR, AN AGING, ARTHRITIC MAN IN POSSESSION OF MANY BOOKS: We interrupt your perusal of Aldo Damiani's intrusive thoughts to provide some necessary academic insight. The great Kurt Gödel, a twentieth-century logician and friend of Albert Einstein, believed that a continuous trajectory of "light cones" toward the future meant that one could always return to the same point in spacetime. It is Aldo Damiani's essential thesis that these cones travel methodically, perhaps even predictably, along hexagonal paths.

Hexagons. Quantum groups. Symmetry. Nature loved balance, especially symmetry, but rarely managed it. How often did nature create perfection? Almost never. Math was different. Math had rules, finite and concrete, but then it just kept going. The problem and the thrill of abstract algebra was that Aldo had been studying it in depth for over seven years, and he could study it for seven million more and still understand almost nothing. He could spend infinite lifetimes studying the mathematical basis of the universe and the universe would still not make sense. In two weeks it might snow, might rain sideways, and then this park would not be available to him. He could get arrested for not-smoking or die at any moment, and then he'd have to do his thinking in jail or not at all, and the universe would remain unsolved. His work would never be done, and that alone was tragic, exhilarating, perfect.

Right on schedule,

FROM ALDO'S POCKET: a vibration that prompts the audience to reach instinctively for their own pockets.

his father called.

Aldo tucked the joint into his pocket and dug out his phone. "Hello?"

"Rinaldo. Where are you?"

There was a long answer and a short answer, and Masso would probably insist on both. "Working."

"You mean school?"

"Yes, Dad. I work at school."

"Mm." Masso already knew that, but the asking was another ritual. "What are you thinking about today?"

"Bees," said Aldo.

"Ah. The usual, then?"

"Yes, something like that." There was never an easy way to explain what he was working on. It was nice of his father to ask, but they both knew that anything Aldo had to say was mostly lost on him. "Everything okay, Dad?"

"Yes, yes, fine. How are you feeling?"

There was a right answer to this question and many, many wrong ones. This question, much like quantum groups, did not get any easier the more times Aldo was asked. The more times he ran the scenarios, in fact, the more the variables changed. How was he feeling? He had been bad before. He would be bad again. It would cycle and fluctuate the same way the weather would. It would rain in two weeks, he thought.

THE WIND picks up slightly, tendrils of it slipping through the leaves.

"I'm fine," Aldo said.

"Good." Masso Damiani was a chef, a single father, and a worrier, in that order. Masso thought about the universe often, the same way Aldo did, but differently. Masso asked the universe how much salt to boil in the water, or whether this vine or that one would provide the sweetest fruit. He knew when the pasta was done without looking, probably because of the universe. Masso had the gift of certainty and did not require any superstition.

Aldo's mother, a lively Dominican girl too young for motherhood and too beautiful to stay long in one place, had never been very present. If she had ever asked anything from the universe, Aldo imagined she'd probably gotten what she wished.

"Rinaldo?"

“I’m listening,” Aldo said, though what he meant was *I’m thinking*.

“Mm,” Masso said. “Did you try the museum?”

“Maybe tomorrow. It’s nice out today.”

“Is it? That’s good. Rare.”

SILENCE.

Masso cleared his throat.

“Tell me, Rinaldo, what are we doing today?”

Aldo’s mouth twitched slightly. “You don’t have to keep doing this, Dad.”

“It helps, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, of course, but I know you’re busy.” Aldo checked his watch. “It’s nearly lunchtime there.”

“Still, I have two minutes. Or so.”

“Two minutes?”

“At least.”

ALDO hums to himself, thinking.

“Well,” said Aldo, “I think maybe today we’re on the ocean.”

“What year?”

He considered it. “When was the Trojan War?”

“About ... 12th century B.C.?”

“Yes. That.”

“Are we fighting, then?”

“No, we’re leaving, I think. Journeying.”

“How is the wind?”

“Poor, I suspect.” Aldo took the joint between his fingers again, rolling it slowly. “I think we may be at sea quite a while.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll just have to find out again tomorrow, then.”

“You don’t have to, Dad.”

ALDO says this every day.

“True, maybe I won’t.”

So does MASSO.

“What’s the special today?” Aldo asked.

“Ah, porcini. You know I like to mark the season with truffles.”

“I’ll let you get to it, then.”

“Okay, good idea. Are you going back now?”

“Yes, I have to teach soon. At three.”

“Good, good. Rinaldo?”

“Dad?”

“You are brilliant. Tell your mind to be kind to you today.”

“Okay. Thanks, Dad. Enjoy the fungi.”

“Always.”

Aldo hung up, tucking the phone back into his pocket. No answers today, unfortunately. Not yet. Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day. Maybe not for months, years, decades. Luckily, Aldo was not a ‘right now’ sort of person. It had once been a quality that frustrated the other people in his life, but he’d gotten rid of most of them by now.

He glanced over his shoulder at his bike,

PROP: a 1969 Ducati Scrambler.

which slid easily through traffic and pedestrians and, as far as Aldo was concerned, through time and space as well. Why anyone would own a car rather than a bike was beyond him, unless they were opposed to the possibility of accidents. He had broken his arm once, scarring up the side of his shoulder.

If he were a ‘right now’ sort of person, he’d probably get on his bike and drive it directly into Lake Michigan, which was why it was probably best that he wasn’t. Aldo was a ‘maybe tomorrow’ sort of person, so he tucked the joint back in his pocket and picked up his helmet from the bench.

ALDO rises to his feet and inhales deeply, thinking about hexagons.

Turns, he thought. One of these days he’d hit a corner and there’d be something else on the other side; something very like this, only 120 degrees different. He mimicked a boxing pivot to the left, struck a left hook, and then kicked a little at the grass.

Maybe tomorrow, everything would be different.

★ ★ ★

REGAN, MEANWHILE, had begun the exact same day by shooting upright in bed.

SCENE: A lavish master bedroom. Shoes have been mislaid. Articles of clothing have been flung. Whatever has happened here, no mother would approve.

ACTION: Regan squints at the clock, which reads an abysmal 2:21 P.M.

“Well, fuck me entirely,” Regan announced to the room.

Beside her Marc rolled over with a groan, managing with great difficulty to expel a series of unintelligible male sounds. Regan presumed them to be a version of “I’m sorry darling, explain?” and answered accordingly.

“I’m going to be late.”

“For what?”

“My fucking job, Marcus,” Regan said, sliding her legs out from beneath the duvet and stumbling upright. “You know, that thing I do from time to time?”

“Doesn’t the Institute have those ... what are those things,” Marc grumbled, shoving his face back into his pillow. “You know, the little ... radio things. For people who can’t read placards.”

“The audio guides?” Regan said, pressing a hand to her temple. Her head spiritedly condemned her poor decisions with a decisive throb. “I’m not a walking audio guide, Marc, I’m a docent. Astonishingly, people might notice if I’m not there.”

THE NARRATOR, A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN WITH A BRISK INTOLERANCE FOR NONSENSE: Charlotte Regan has a degree in Art History and would likely say that she has dabbled in art herself, which is in many ways an understatement. She graduated college at the top of her class, which had been no surprise to anyone once upon a time; except maybe her mother, who considered the top of a liberal arts program to be the equivalent of being, say, the winner of a dog show. Among the things Charlotte Regan was *not* was her older sister Madeline, who’d finished at the top of medical school, but that is of course not relevant to the subject at hand. Presently, Charlotte Regan is a docent at the Art Institute of Chicago, a coveted role at one of the oldest and largest art museums in the United States. Charlotte’s mother would say it’s a glorified

volunteer position rather than a job, but that, again, is not relevant at this time.

While many things made Regan *#blessed*,

THE NARRATOR, DISAPPROVINGLY: She is being sarcastic.

primary among them was her hair, which was characteristically perfect, and her skin, which was generally resistant to the consequences of her lifestyle. Genetically speaking, she was built for waking up late and rushing out the door. A swipe of mascara would do the trick, and maybe a rose-tinted lip stain for the high bones of her cheeks, just to make her look slightly less dead. She pulled out one of her black sheath dresses and a pair of black ballet flats, twisting the Claddagh ring on her finger. Then she reached for the earrings she'd stolen from her sister's room after college graduation: the little teardrop garnets that made her ears look like they were slowly weeping blood.

She paused to eye her reflection with something of a honed ambivalence. The dark circles were getting notably worse. Luckily her mother had given her the East Asian genes for eternal youth and her father had given her a trust fund that made people think twice about rejecting her, so it didn't really matter whether she slept or not. Regan pinned her nametag to her chest, pricking her thumb only once in the process, and stopped to eye the finished product.

"Hi," she said to the mirror, practicing a smile. "I'm Charlotte Regan, and I'll be your guide to the Art Institute today."

"What?" Marc asked groggily.

"Nothing," she said over her shoulder.

They'd fucked last night to moderately successful results, though Marc never got particularly hard when he'd done that much cocaine. But at least she'd gone home with him. At least she'd gone home at all. There had been a moment when she might have opted not to; when a stranger standing in the corner near the back of the room might have been the more interesting choice, whereupon she might have hazarded a little sashay his way. All it would have taken was a breathy laugh, a sly *Take me home, Stranger*, and then wouldn't it have been so easy? There were a million spidery webs of possibility in which Regan had not come

home, had not slept with her boyfriend, had not woken up in time for work, had not woken up at all.

She wondered what she was doing out there in all those mirror-shards of lives un-lived. Maybe there was a version of her who had woken up at six and gone jogging on the lake path, though she doubted it.

Still, it was nice to consider. It meant she possessed creativity still.

This version of herself, Regan calculated, had fifteen minutes to get to the Art Institute, and if she believed in impossibilities she would have believed it to be impossible. Fortunately or unfortunately, she believed in everything and nothing.

She fingered the bloody tears of her earrings and pivoted sharply, eyeing Marc's shape beneath the sheets.

"Maybe we should break up," she said.

"Regan, it's seven in the morning," Marc replied, voice muffled.

"It's almost two-thirty, dipshit."

He lifted his head, squinting. "What day is it?"

"Thursday."

"Mm." He burrowed his face in his pillow again. "Okay, sure, Regan."

"We could always just, I don't know. See other people?" she suggested.

He rolled over with a sigh, propping himself up with his elbows.

"Regan, aren't you late?"

"Not yet," she said, "but I will be, if you want." She knew he wouldn't.

"We both know you're not going anywhere, babe. All your stuff is here. You hate inconvenience. And you'd have to use condoms again."

She made a face. "True."

"Have you taken your pills?" he asked.

She glanced at her watch. If she left in five minutes, she'd probably still make it.

She considered what she could do in five minutes. *This isn't working, I'm not happy, it's been fun*—that would take what, thirty seconds? Marc wouldn't cry, which was something she liked about him, so it wouldn't be terribly inconvenient. Then she'd have four and a half minutes to gather up the things that mattered and throw them into a bag, which would really only require about two. Which would then leave two and

half minutes. Ah, but thirty seconds for pills, she kept forgetting. Five seconds to take them but twenty or so to stare blankly at the bottles. Which ... what could she do with the remaining two minutes? Eat breakfast? It was nearly two-thirty. Breakfast was out of the question, temporally speaking, and besides, she wasn't sure she could eat yet.

Motion from the clock suggested that Regan's five minutes for flight had dropped to four. There'd be such a terrible restriction on her time now unless she recalculated, rescheduled. Changed her priorities.

"I have to do something," she said suddenly, turning away.

"Are we breaking up?" Marc called after her.

"Not today," she told him, snatching the orange bottles from their usual place beside the fridge before making her way to the bathroom. She set the pills aside and pulled herself onto the sink, hiking one leg upright to rest her heel atop the marble counter, and slid her hand under her seamless thong, unlocking her phone with her free hand. She'd never enjoyed porn, finding it kind of ... upsettingly unsubtle. She preferred mystery—craved it like a drug—so she pulled up a password protected note on her screen.

THE FIRST PHOTO is a grainy shot of a nondescript male hand under a short skirt, positioned lasciviously between the slim curves of female thighs. The second is a black-and-white image of two female torsos pressed together.

This, Regan determined, was worth it. This was the better decision. She could have ended her relationship, true, but instead she had these four minutes. No, three and a half. But she knew her physicalities well, and therefore knew she'd need only three, tops. That left at least thirty seconds.

With the remainder of her time, she could do something very Regan, like tucking her underwear into Marc's jacket pocket before she kissed him goodbye. He'd find it later that evening, probably while he was schmoozing with some bespoke-suited exec, at which point he'd sneak into a bathroom stall and take a picture of his dick for her. He'd expect something in return, probably, but in all likelihood she'd be sleeping. Or maybe she wouldn't have come home at all. What a mystery, her future self! The possibilities were fascinatingly mundane and yet, somehow, perfectly endless, which was close enough to elation itself.

She came, biting down on the sensation, and exhaled.
Forty-five seconds.

REGAN reaches for the bottle of pills and says nothing. She wonders how long it will be until she feels something again.

★ ★ ★

ALDO WAS GETTING HIS PH.D. in theoretical mathematics, which meant a broad variety of things depending on who he was saying it to. Strangers were typically impressed with him, albeit in a disbelieving sort of way. Most people thought he was joking, as people who looked like him did not typically say the words “I’m getting my doctorate in theoretical mathematics” unironically. His father was proud of him but blindly, having been bewildered by most things Aldo had done or said for the majority of his life. Others were unsurprised. “You’re one of those brainy fucks, right?” Aldo’s dealer used to say, always asking about the chances of winning this or that, and though Aldo would remind him that statistics was a practical application, i.e. *applied* math, his dealer would simply shrug, ask something about life in outer space (Aldo didn’t know anything about life in outer space) and hand him the items he’d requested.

Aldo’s students detested him. The truly gifted ones tolerated him, but the others—the undergraduates who were taking calculus to satisfy requirements for study—positively loathed him. He lent very little thought to why, which was likely part of the problem.

Aldo was not an especially good communicator, either. That was what the drugs had been for to begin with; he was an anxious kid, then a depressed teen, and then, for a brief period, a full-blown addict. He had learned over time to keep his thoughts to himself, which was most easily accomplished if his brain activity was split into categories. His mind was like a computer with multiple applications open, some of them buzzing with contemplation in the background. Most of the time Aldo did not give others the impression he was listening, a suspicion that was generally correct.

“Exponential and logarithmic functions,” Aldo said without preamble, walking into the poorly lit classroom

SCENE: A university classroom.

and suffering the usual itch to dive out its institutional windows. He was exactly one minute late, and, as a rule, was never early. Had he been any earlier to arrive, he might have had to interact with his students, which neither he nor they wished him to do.

“Did anyone struggle with the reading?”

“Yes,” said one of the students in the second row.

Unsurprising.

“What exactly is this used for?” asked a student in the back.

Aldo, who preferred not to dirty his hands with application, loathed that particular question. “Charting bacterial growth,” he said on a whim. He found linear functions banal. They were mostly used to simplify things to a base level of understanding, though few things on earth were ever so straightforward. The world, after all, was naturally entropic.

Aldo strode over to the whiteboard, which he hated, though it was at least less messy than chalk. “Growth and decay,” he said, scrawling out a graph before scribbling $g(x)$ beside it. Historically speaking, this lecture would be extremely frustrating for all of them. Aldo found it difficult to focus on something that required so little of his attention; conversely, his students found it difficult to follow his line of thought. If the department were not so hard-pressed for qualified teachers, he doubted he would have been promoted to lecturer. His performance as an apprentice had been less than stellar, but unfortunately for everyone (himself included), Aldo was brilliant at what he did.

The university needed him. He needed a job. His students, then, would simply have to adapt, as he had.

For Aldo, time in the classroom regularly slid to a crawl. He was interrupted several times by questions that he was required by university policy not to remark were stupid. He enjoyed solving problems, true, but found teaching to be more tedious than challenging. His brain didn’t approach things in an easily observable way; he unintentionally skipped steps and was then forced to move backwards, usually by the sound of some throat-clearing distress at his back.

He knew, on some level, that repetition was required for some base level of learning—extensive boxing training had been part of his self-inflicted rehab, so he knew the importance of running the same drill over and over until his head pounded and his limbs were sore—but that didn’t stop him from lamenting it. It didn’t keep him from wishing he could

walk out of the room, turn a corner, and head in an entirely different direction.

Theoretically speaking, anyway.

★ ★ ★

THE FIRST OF THE DAY'S TOURS included an elderly couple, two twenty-something women, a handful of German tourists, and what Regan furtively ascertained (having made it a custom to check for rings whether she was interested in the outcome or not) to be a married couple in their mid-thirties. The husband was staring at her, poor thing. She knew that particular stare and was no longer especially flattered by it. She'd started using it to her advantage as a teenager, and now simply stored it among her other tools. Philip's head, paintbrush, saturation scale, the attraction of unavailable men; it was all the same category of functionality.

This particular husband was good-looking, sort of. His wife had a pretty but unremarkable face. Likely the husband, a "catch" by virtue of what Regan guessed to be a practical job selling insurance, saw the Chinese mixing with Irish in Regan's features and considered it some sort of exotic thrill. In reality, she could have been the genetic combination of half the Art Institute's current occupants.

"I'm sure many of you will recognize Jackson Pollock's work," Regan said, gesturing to the *Greyed Rainbow* canvas behind her.

THE NARRATOR, A TEENAGE GIRL WHO IS BARELY PAYING ATTENTION: The piece *Greyed Rainbow* by Jackson Pollock is basically just a black surface covered with splotches of grey and white oil paints with, I don't know, some other colors at the bottom. It's like, abstract or whatever.

"One of the most remarkable features of Pollock's art is how tactile it is," Regan continued. "I encourage you to step forward to witness the painting's depths up close; the layers of paint have a distinct solidity you will not find elsewhere."

The Wife stepped closer, eagerly eyeing it upon Regan's suggestion, and the others followed suit. The Husband hung back, hovering in Regan's eyeline.

"Amazing they even call this art, isn't it? I could do this. Hell, a six-year-old could do this." The Husband's gaze slid to hers. "I bet you