

Our Country Friends

A Novel

"A MASTERPIECE."
—Andrew Sean Greer
Pulitzer Prize-winning
author of *LESS*

Gary
Shteyngart

New York Times bestselling author of *SUPER SAD TRUE LOVE STORY*

OUR COUNTRY FRIENDS

A NOVEL

Gary Shteyngart



RANDOM HOUSE
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Our Country Friends is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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By Gary Shteyngart

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Dramatis Personae

ALEXANDER (SASHA) SENDEROVSKY—*A writer and landowner.*

MASHA LEVIN-SENDEROVSKY—*His wife, a psychiatric doctor.*

NATASHA (NAT) LEVIN-SENDEROVSKY—*Their child.*

KAREN CHO—*Inventor of popular phone dating application and a high-school friend of Senderovsky's.*

VINOD MEHTA—*A former adjunct professor and short-order cook, also Senderovsky's and Karen Cho's high-school friend.*

ED KIM—*A gentleman.*

DEE CAMERON—*A writer and former student of Senderovsky's.*

THE ACTOR—*Described by the Neue Zürcher Zeitung as the world's greatest thespian.*

Various AMERICAN VILLAGERS.

ACT ONE



The Colony

1

THE HOUSE ON the Hill was in a tizzy.

Workmen's trucks streamed up the long gravel driveway. Two sets of plumbers from both sides of the river had been summoned to dewinterize the five bungalows behind the main house, and they did not care for one another. A broken set of windows in one bungalow had to be replaced posthaste, and a family of field mice had chewed through the electrical cable powering another. The handyman, who did not live on the property, was so overwhelmed by the state of affairs, he retreated to the extensive covered porch to eat a cheese sandwich in long deliberative bites. The mistress of the house, Masha, had lowered the shades in her first-floor office to escape the cacophony of modern tools and loud country cursing. At times, she would peek out to note the surfaces that would have to be wiped down after the workmen left. Natasha (who liked to go by Nat), her eight-year-old daughter, was upstairs, illuminated by a screen in the darkness of her room, in a lonely public world of her own.

The only happy member of the household was Alexander Borisovich Senderovsky, known as Sasha to his friends. "Happy," we should say, with an asterisk. He was agitated as well as excited. A windstorm had brought down the heavy branches of two dead trees flanking the driveway, scattering the vast front lawn with their dead white rot. Senderovsky liked to expound at length upon the "entropic" nature of his estate, the way all manner of growth was allowed to go its own way, sumacs elbowing out more well-heeled plants, ivy poisoning the perimeter, groundhogs bringing destruction upon the gardens. But the scattering of dead tree limbs made the House on the Hill look apocalyptic, the very thing Senderovsky's guests

were coming up to escape. The handyman claimed a bad back and was not handy enough to remove all the tree limbs on his own, and the so-called tree guy had gone missing. Senderovsky, in his athletic pants and wildly colored dressing gown, had tried to move one of these prehistoric-looking branches himself, but the very first heave made him fear a hernia.

“Ah, the hell with it,” he said, and got into his car. A word about the car. Well, not so much about the car, as the way in which it was driven. Senderovsky had only learned to drive three years ago, at the milestone age of forty-five, and only within the limits of a country setting. The highway on the other side of the river unsettled him. He was a fiercely awful driver. The half-empty local roads inspired him to “gun” the engine of his sturdy but inflexible Swedish automobile, and he saw the yellow stripes bisecting the roads as suggestions meant for “less experienced drivers,” whoever that might be. Because he did not believe in road marks or certain aspects of relativity, the concept of a blind curve continued to elude him. (His wife no longer allowed him to drive with their child onboard.) What was worse, he had somewhere picked up the phrase “tooling around.”

And now Senderovsky raced to his errands, mindful only of the speed traps, set with boring predictability on the frayed edges of towns or the school zones, where the fines could be doubled. First, he visited his butchers, two former catalog models from the city, now a husband and wife, who plied their trade out of a barn so red it verged on the patriotic. The two magnificent twenty-five-year-olds, all teeth and coveralls, presented him with a wrapped parcel of sweet and Italian sausages, glistening hamburger patties, and his secret weapon: lamb steaks that clung to the bone, so fresh they could only have been rivaled by a restaurant Senderovsky admired in Rome’s abattoir district. The very sight of meat for tomorrow’s cookout inspired in him a joy that in a younger man could be called love. Not because of the meat itself, but because of the conversations that would flow around it as it was marinated, grilled, and served, despite the growing restrictions on such closeness. By noon tomorrow, his best friends, the ones who had been so hard to bring together during previous summers, would finally unite, brought together by the kernels of a growing tragedy to be

him was not moving. It sat low to the ground, a rusted wheelbarrow jammed into its trunk, a national flag fluttering from the driver's window, and a partly peeled sticker on the bumper that read I STAND BY MY PRES... Senderovsky realized that at this pace there was no way he could go to the store and drop off the meat before Ed's train arrived. Ignoring the very clear markings on the road warning against just such a maneuver, he whipsawed his car around, and within minutes was charging up his long driveway, once again cursing the fallen tree branches that ruined the approach to the House on the Hill. As he noisily threw the meat into the industrial-sized freezer in the vast white kitchen (the house had once belonged to a chef), he dialed the boy from across the river who came round to do the lawn mowing, begging him to get rid of the branches. But the boy had other things to do. "What things?" Senderovsky challenged, threatening to pay double. Out on the covered porch he confronted the handyman who was listening to old music on a handsome red radio, but all he got was "The missus told me I wasn't to move anything heavy on account of the back."

Senderovsky's own missus now stepped onto the porch in her kaftan, arms akimbo, her fingers pressed into the softness of her abdomen. "I can't work with all this noise," Masha said in Russian to her husband, mindful of the handyman. "It's a workday for me. My patients can barely hear me and they're agitated as it is."

"What noise?"

"There's drilling by the bungalows, and you're throwing meat in the freezer and yelling at the lawn boy."

"Darling," Senderovsky answered, using an inflated diminutive of the term: *dorogushka*. He had known his wife since they were children. Russian was a language built around the exhalation of warmth and pain, but lately Senderovsky had found his declarations of love for his wife stilted, as if he were reading them from a play. "The workers will knock off at three, as they always do," he said. "And I've only to pick up Ed and get the groceries."

The handyman stared at them for the aliens they were. When he had started working for them three years ago, they were of approximate size,

sure, but brought together nonetheless, in his favorite place on earth, the House on the Hill.

Of course, someone else was coming, too. Someone who was not a friend. Someone who made Senderovsky, already a drinker, drink more.

With that in mind, he sped to the liquor store in the richest village in the district, which occupied the premises of a former church. He bought two cases of Austrian Riesling at the south transept, another of rosé at the north, along with a fourth case of Beaujolais, wildly out of season, but a nostalgic wine for him and his high-school friends, Vinod and Karen. Ed, as always, would be the hardest to accommodate. Deep in the sacristy, Senderovsky picked out an eighteen-year-old bottle of something beyond his means, two bottles each of cognac and rye, and, to show his frivolous side, schnapps and a strange single malt from the Tyrol. The proprietor, a shaggy Anglo with a rosacea nose peeking out from his loosely worn mask, looked very pleased as he rang up the many purchases, his fingers clad in black disposable gloves.

“Just got a call from the state,” he said to Senderovsky. “They might shut me down any day now as nonessential.” Senderovsky sighed and bought an extra case of the Riesling and two bottles of an artisanal gin he had never heard of. He could picture Ed pursing his lips around a glass and pronouncing it “drinkable.” When the final bill, adding up to just over four digits, meandered out of the machine in many long spurts, Senderovsky’s hand could barely slalom through his signature. A special occasion, he consoled himself.

With his trunk now filled with bottles as well as meats, he gunned his car toward yet another village, this one fifteen miles north, to do some more marketing, after which he was due to drop off the meat and pick up Ed from the train station. At the exit for the bridge crossing the river, he ran into a line of cars. Nothing irritated Senderovsky more than the local version of a traffic jam. He brought a city impatience to the rural life. Around here it was considered impolite to honk, but Senderovsky honked. He rolled down his window, thrust out his long bony face, and honked some more with the palm of his hand, the way he had seen men do in films. The car in front of

two smallish figures, college professors most likely (a tiny but very active college was within striking range of Senderovsky's car), annoying in their requests and frugal in their outlays, but speaking with one slightly accented city voice. Now the woman had become larger, more local-looking around the waist and arms, while the man had done the opposite, had shrunk and emaciated himself and lost most of his hair, his only salient points a sharp nose and the brick of a forehead, to the point that the handyman suspected he was ill. In another reversal, the husband seemed happier today, despite the seeping sibilants of the language they spoke, while she had taken on his former briskness. Whatever this weekend would bring, the handyman thought, it would not be good. Also, he had heard that the Senderovskys' appliance repairman from across the river had not been paid in months even as the refrigerator in the main house continued to break down in interesting new ways.

The conversation continued, rising in pitch, until the woman turned to the handyman and said, "Would you mind trimming the hedges by the pool? Everyone else is busy."

"That type of work I'm not really cut out for," the handyman said. Despite the cold March weather, he was wearing denim shorts of an antiquated sky blue, and one of his legs was covered in iconography neither of the Senderovskys could understand, eagles, snakes, and cryptic symbols, which they hoped was not a sign of a violent affiliation. The first year they had bought the House on the Hill, after they had set out their nondenominational New Year's tree, the handyman had said to the husband, "I didn't figure you for Christmas-tree people." He had smiled as he said it, but they both had lain awake that night, wondering what he meant.

"The trimmers are in the garage," the wife said to the handyman. "We would really appreciate it." That was another change the handyman had noticed over the last few years: while the husband dithered, the wife now spoke with finality, a rubber band snapped against the fingers.

Senderovsky kissed his wife awkwardly on the brow and ran for his car. He tore down the driveway at forty miles an hour, rearranging the gravel behind him into a series of bald spots, and swung onto the road without

checking for oncoming vehicles. As he picked up still more speed by the neighboring sheep farm, there was a rattling in the back, and he realized he had forgotten to clear out the cartons of alcohol. He wondered what would happen if he were to transfer a bottle of whiskey to the front of the car. On previous visits, he and Ed would swig while driving home, impatient to resume their friendship. Today, made happy by the arrival of his friends, and anxious by the arrival of his nemesis, Senderovsky wanted to flood his mouth with liquor, to stupefy himself in the manner of his ancestors.

The lot in front of the station was filled with European cars awaiting passengers. Senderovsky waved to a professor of Calabrese studies at the local college and to the owner of a surprisingly thriving café and bookstore anchoring the fashionable neighborhood of the little city right across the river. Seeing these friendly faces cheered Senderovsky. He was a respected figure in these parts. “You have a lovely family and a lovely home,” his Los Angeles agent had told him during a visit several years ago, after another television project had collapsed.

The train was twenty minutes late, but finally its ancient gray form drew flush with the similarly gray line of the river. City folk clambered up the stairs from the platform to the station, breathless with age. Senderovsky spotted his first guest, relatively young and limber. Ed Kim toted a leather Gladstone bag, wore aviator sunglasses, and kept his hair dark. From the moment he had met him when they were both in their twenties, Ed reminded Senderovsky of a film he had seen about China’s last emperor, specifically the dissolute stage when the hero wore a tuxedo and was the puppet ruler of Manchuria.

Senderovsky jumped out of the car. He was still wearing his dressing gown, a gift Ed had bought him at a Hong Kong shop called The Armoury. The two men regarded each other by the curb, Senderovsky playing the dog to Ed’s cat. Usually, he would surround his friend in a skinny-armed embrace while Ed tapped his back with one hand as if burping him. “Ah, what are we supposed to do now?” Senderovsky cried.

“I’m over this elbow-bump business,” Ed said. “Let me get a look at you.” He lowered his sunglasses, the way some uncles do when they greet

their young nieces. The creases around his eyes looked like they had been there since birth, while his expression was both distant and amused. Senderovsky's friend Karen, who was slightly related to Ed through a dissipated ancestor back in Seoul, also sometimes wore that expression, but she had only been able to pull it off after her recent success.

Ed managed to light a cigarette with one hand while simultaneously popping open the trunk and depositing his vintage bag. "So Masha told me to tell everyone," Senderovsky said, "no smoking in the car. In fact, no smoking on the property either. She says it can make the virus worse if you get it.

"But," he added, "I left an ashtray in your bungalow under the sink."

"Just let me get three drags in," Ed said. Sasha watched as he drew three cartoonish inhales and expelled the smoke into the slate air. As a younger man, Sasha had dreamed of becoming Ed. He still fantasized about spending a year traveling around the world with him just as soon as his daughter graduated from the very expensive city school for sensitive and complicated children.

"Also," Senderovsky continued, "she told me that no one should sit in the front seat. For distancing purposes."

"Oh, the hell with that," Ed said, opening the front passenger door. "People are really going overboard with this thing. I'll crouch down when we get to the house." The car filled with the aroma of fresh tobacco, which made Senderovsky wistful for a smoke. Ed placed a hand on the glove compartment, bracing himself for the landowner's torque. "What happened there?" He pointed at the dangling side mirror.

"The garage bays are too narrow," Senderovsky said. Seconds had passed, but the train station was already far behind them, and they were racing, swerving, past the skeleton of what, in three months' time, would become a farm stand. "I ought to have them widened."

"What's that Russian saying about incompetent people trying to pass the blame?"

Senderovsky laughed. "'A bad dancer is bothered by his balls.'"

"Mmmm."

“Would you mind if we get some groceries? All I have is the meat and booze.”

“I’m in no hurry,” Ed said, and Senderovsky immediately thought of a fitting epitaph for his friend: HERE LIES EDWARD SUNGJOON KIM, HE WAS IN NO HURRY. He accelerated the car farther north along a tight state road that allowed for a view of the purple mountains across the river, each given a sophomoric American name. Peekamoose was his daughter’s favorite. Meanwhile, as Senderovsky pattered on about the weather, the political news, speculation about the virus, the merits of sweet sausage versus hot Italian, Ed espied a great frontal system of boredom on the horizon, of endless upper-middle-class chatter, badly made country Negronis, cigarettes snuck. What could he do? His friend had begged him to come up, and the now-muted city would be more depressing still.

“So who else is coming?” Ed asked. “Besides the Exalted One.” He was referring to the famous actor who was coming up for a few days to work on a screenplay with Senderovsky, the source of his friend’s anxiety. “Karen, you said.”

“Vinod, too.”

“Haven’t seen him in ages. Is he still in love with Karen?”

“He lost a lung to cancer a few years ago. Then he lost his job at City College.”

“That’s a lot of loss.”

“Masha wanted him to come up, because his immune system might be compromised.”

“I wish I was tragic enough for your wife to like me.”

“Keep working on it.”

“Who else?”

“An old student of mine. She published an essay collection last year. *The Grand Book of Self-Compromise and Surrender*. It made a splash.”

“Well, at least she’ll be young. Maybe I’ll learn a thing or two. How’s your kid, by the way?”

“Flourishing,” Senderovsky said.

They skidded into a town that wasn't. The selection at Rudolph's Market, its sole business, contained goods that neither Ed (born Seoul, 1975) nor his host (Leningrad, 1972) had enjoyed in their early non-American years, candy that tasted like violets, bread that was so enriched you could use it for insulation. Alongside these outrageously marked-up nostalgic items were international ones even dearer, which Ed carelessly piled into a basket. There were fresh whole sardines that could be grilled before the meats, dirigible-shaped Greek olives from ancient islands, cheeses so filled with aromatic herbs they inspired (on Senderovsky's part) memories that had never happened, ingredients for a simple *vitello tonnato* that somehow came to over eighty dollars, excluding the veal. "I think we have enough," Senderovsky said with alarm. "I don't want anything to spoil."

They were standing in a long line of second-home owners. When the shocking amount due appeared on a touch screen, they both looked away, until the old woman behind the counter coughed, informatively, into her gloved fist. Senderovsky sighed and reached for his card.

Soon, they were raising gravel up the long driveway. It was only 2:00 P.M., but the workers had already left, along with their powerful trucks stenciled with old local names. "I'm sorry about all these dead branches," Senderovsky said. "I've been trying to get them cleaned up."

"What branches?" Ed was looking absently at his new home, at the bungalows rising up behind the main house like a half circle of orbiting moons. The sky was the color of an old-fashioned projector screen pulled down to the edges of the distant hills, splotched here and there by the hand of an inky boy.

Meanwhile, in her office, Masha had lifted up a heavy beaded curtain. She saw Ed clambering out of her husband's car with the languor that came so easily for him. Naturally, he had not sat in the back, like she had asked. She made a snort she instantly recognized as her grandmother's, a labor camp survivor. *Well, there it is*, her grandmother would say. The first of the children was here. More children for Masha to take care of, in addition to the one watching Asian boy-band videos upstairs, mouth open, eyes bleary,

pacified. Soon the property would be filled with them, grown children without children. All of her friends were married, unlike her husband's (and none was crazy enough to visit someone else's house at a time like this). Masha shut off her screen, thought about changing out of her kaftan for Ed, but then went into the driveway exactly as she was.

Ed was walking with the leather Gladstone creaking behind him. Masha had partly grown up in New Jersey and had seen powerful men carry golf bags in a similar way. "How was the train up?" she shouted, her tone a little too needy, she thought.

"Charming," Ed said. "I got a seat with river views." He knew he had to get some preliminaries out of the way: "Thank you so much for hosting me during this time. It's much appreciated." He forced himself to take an exaggerated breath of damp air. "Mmm," he said. "Just what the surgeon general ordered. You both look wonderful. Sasha's really lost some weight."

The weight comment, he quickly realized, could be misinterpreted by Masha, who was beautiful but now reminded him of a noblewoman's portrait he had seen last year at the Tretyakov Gallery. The kaftan certainly didn't help. The two men walked silently up the cedar steps of the vast covered porch, which was connected to the main house and overlooked the bungalows, the centerpiece of the property and also its jewel, a screened-in world within a world.

"If you don't mind, I'm going to be a little doctorly," Masha said, "if that's even a word."

"Not at all," Ed said. Not at all he didn't mind, or "doctorly" was not at all a word? Masha had to think about it, which maybe was the point.

"I've made some rules," she said. "Since you've taken the train up, maybe you could change into fresh clothes before you sit down anywhere. But before that I'd like to wipe down some of the surfaces, which the workers touched in your bungalow. There's a lot we still don't know about this virus."

"Safety first."

She did not like his tone. Senderovsky stood beside them in a hunched-over position. He had had to serve as diplomat between two feuding parents

for many decades. “Also in public areas like the porch and the dining room,” Masha continued, “I’m going to try to space everyone out and also to give everyone a designated seat. I’m sorry if I sound like a killjoy.”

“There’s no right or wrong here,” Ed said. “We all have to be ourselves during this crisis.”

Actually, there was a right and a wrong here. Ed reminded her of her husband’s parents. Talking with them was like dealing with a smiling adversary who kept a handful of poisoned toothpicks in his pocket. Every time you let your guard down, there would be a sharp prick at your haunches.

“Here’s another question I have to ask. And this is really a compliment, because you’re always going somewhere. Can you tell me where you’ve traveled since, let’s say, December of last year?”

“Since December? Hmmm.” Ed looked up at the stucco-clad main house, a neutral gray like the sky. People of a certain class, immigrants in particular, did not like to rock the boat. A second-floor landing and an adjoining window were yellow-lit at an odd angle, like a Mondrian painting—the top quadrant being the daughter’s room, most likely. Ed had forgotten her name.

“Well, I went to Addis for the jazz thing,” he said. “Then I went to AD to visit Jimmy who’s teaching there.” Ed drew a line in the air from (presumably) Addis Ababa to (presumably) Abu Dhabi. “I went back to Seoul for Christmas. No, wait.” The line across the Arabian Sea stopped abruptly, and Ed’s finger circled, dumping fuel. “I saw Suketu in Bombay, just for the weekend, then I continued on to Seoul.” Sasha followed the line in the air with great interest, imagining it were he and not Ed doing the travel, a business-class whiskey in hand. A long time ago, after his childhood relationship with Masha had ended, but before his adult relationship with her would begin, he had worked as a contributing editor to a travel magazine, humping around both hemispheres with nothing but a notepad and some vocabulary. That interval contained some of the best years of his life, the expense accounts, the sweat of tropical cities, the drunken camaraderie of the Eds of the world.

“When did you leave Seoul?” Masha was asking.

“Oh, I see what you’re getting at. I left right after Christmas, before things got bad there. And from there”—Ed’s index finger was ready for a significant jump—“I went to the Big Island.”

“In honor of our bungalow!” Sasha said, brightly. The bungalow reserved for Ed mimicked the one he and Masha had enjoyed during their honeymoon on Hawaii’s Big Island, and it came with a feature no other house did—an outdoor shower, its walls rendered in seashells.

“Yes,” Ed said. “My friend Wei got a bungalow at the Mauna Kea. Call me a bungalow hopper.”

“Wei Li?” Senderovsky asked.

“Wei Ko. He’s in biotech. I guess this is his moment to shine.”

“And then you came back to the city,” Masha said.

“Well, actually, no. My brother bought a vineyard in Hungary.” Senderovsky remembered the Austrian Riesling and assorted alcohol still rattling around in his trunk, and prayed nothing had broken during his many trips, especially the eighteen-year-old bottle he had bought for Ed and the Actor to share. “I was over by Lake Balaton,” Ed continued. “Did your families ever go there back in the day? Soviet vacations? The wine was plonk, but I ate a great veal liver soaked in butter and paprika, would love to know how they made it. And then London.”

“Any reason for London?” Masha asked. Sasha thought that she sounded like a Heathrow immigration officer inspecting a visitor from a developing country.

“No, it was just—London,” Ed said.

“Last question, I promise. Any trips to China or Northern Italy?”

“Nope,” Ed said. He set down his Gladstone bag with a thud of frustration. “Wait, actually, I transferred through Linate once.”

“That’s Milan,” Sasha said.

Both men noted the way Masha looked at her husband just then. But it wasn’t her husband’s suggestion that she wasn’t worldly that irked her. They force me to be someone I’m not, Masha thought. They mistake my caring for authoritarianism, and then I have no choice but to become Stalin

in an apron. But what option do I have if I'm to keep these cretins from getting sick?

"It was a very brief transfer," Ed said of his time in Northern Italy. "I'm sure I don't have it." When Ed Kim became nervous during conversation, he cupped his right hand behind his right ear, as if trying to make a conch shell out of it. It was a nervous tic everyone noticed, and he himself was well aware of, but he couldn't stop his ear cupping during times of social anxiety.

"I'm sure you don't," Masha said. "I really hate to go through all this. It's because of Natasha." Right, that was the daughter's name. Sasha, Masha, Natasha. They didn't even try, these Russians. "You can't be too careful," she added. "Any special requests for dinner?"

"Don't even think about it," Ed said. "I'm going to cook tonight. You just rest up. I've heard parents have it extra hard these days. And I'm sure Sasha's no help at all."

"We bought some amazing things," Senderovsky said. "We know how much you love fresh sardines." Masha smiled. Even if it wasn't true that they had thought of her, the lie was nice. She would settle for the lie. Ed thought he had caught a glimpse of her youth when she smiled. The new plushness of her chin reminded him of a Greek girl he had fallen in love with, almost a decade ago to the day, one of the last times he had ever loved somebody, had allowed forgotten parts of himself, the underside of his ankles, his eyelashes, to tingle for no reason. Senderovsky placed both hands in the fertile valley between his breasts and his throat, happy that his friend and his wife were getting along. There was complete stillness now, except for the sound of an overexcited tree frog and the handyman loudly clipping the hedges by the covered pool, as if protesting his lot.

A pebbled path ran between the bungalows, in a way that Senderovsky had hoped would create the feel of a tidy European village, the kind that would have never welcomed his ancestors. The bungalows formed a crescent around the main house, some overlooking a classical meadow, others a minor forest overrun by noisy animals. They were cozy in winter, as all small dwellings should be, and utilitarian in summer, but they lacked

the visual flair of smoking chimneys or sliding porch doors. The luxuries were supposed to be communal: the fine food and even-finer conversation. There had been a dearth of laughter and clever ideas in Senderovsky's early homelife, and even though nowadays he went out to restaurants and the occasional literary party in the city, nothing pleased him more than being the ringleader of his country menagerie. Not to mention the stealth surprise of walking across acres of private Senderovsky land on a continent that had signed his adoption papers.

Alone, Ed unpacked his bag, laptop (he remembered now that there was no reception in the bungalow), chargers, fresh packets of balled-up Korean underwear presented by his mother's maid, polo shirts, a linen jacket (would he really have to stay into summer?), two ties, and a pocket square. He sat down on the soft, comfortable, Art Deco-adjacent bed and had what must have been a panic attack, his breaths coming in quick short bursts as if he was sucking air out of a balloon at gunpoint.

The sole window disclosed an ever-deepening gray, an artificial intelligence's idea of days passing on earth. He was so close yet so far from the city's fast-moving harbor skies. Were there ever contrails above the peaked cedar roof? Planes following the river down to the airports? He heard a purser's strict, pinched voice from what already seemed like another era: *Meine Damen und Herren, wir begeben uns jetzt auf den Abstieg nach Berlin-Tegel*. How many of his similarly situated friends around the world were looking out of a double-insulated window or up at a pitched cedar ceiling trying to calm themselves with similar incantations?

Above the headboard there was a lush photograph of lava from the Big Island's Kīlauea volcano boiling into the Pacific. Ed thought the composition was obvious but beautiful, interplanetary even, yet he scrambled up on the bed and moved the frame to make it about twenty degrees off kilter. He messed up the bed's careful sheets as if two lovers had just enjoyed a tussle on it. He spotted two carved wooden statues of pineapples on the modernist desk (noting that significant pineapple production had only ever taken place on Maui and Oahu, never on the Big