



The  
Candy  
House

a novel

Pulitzer Prize–Winning Author of  
A VISIT FROM THE GOON SQUAD

Jennifer  
Egan

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# THE CANDY HOUSE

A NOVEL

JENNIFER EGAN

SCRIBNER

New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

To my writing group—Collaborators and compatriots,

Ruth Danon

Lisa Fugard

Melissa Maxwell

David Rosenstock

Elizabeth Tippens

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—  
For—put them side by side—  
The one the other will contain  
With ease—and You—beside—

Emily Dickinson

For nothing is more unbearable, once one has it, than  
freedom.

James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*

**BUILD**

# The Affinity Charm

## 1

“I have this craving,” Bix said as he stood beside the bed stretching out his shoulders and spine, a nightly ritual before lying down. “Just to talk.”

Lizzie met his eyes over the dark curls of Gregory, their youngest, who was suckling at her breast. “Listening,” she murmured.

“It’s...” He took a long breath. “I don’t know. Hard.”

Lizzie sat up, and Bix saw that he’d alarmed her. Gregory, dislodged, squawked, “Mama! I can’t reach.” He had just turned three.

“We’ve got to wean this kid,” Bix muttered.

“No,” Gregory objected sharply, with a reproving glance at Bix. “I don’t want to.”

Lizzie succumbed to Gregory’s tugs and lay back down. Bix wondered if this last of their four children might, with his wife’s complicity, prolong his infancy into adulthood. He stretched out beside the two of them and peered anxiously into her eyes.

“What’s wrong, love?” Lizzie whispered.

“Nothing,” he lied, because the trouble was too pervasive, too amorphous to explain. He chased it with a truth: “I keep thinking about East Seventh Street. Those conversations.”

“Again,” she said softly.

“Again.”

“But why?”

Bix didn’t know why—especially since he’d only half-listened, back on East Seventh Street, as Lizzie and her friends called out to one another through a cumulus of pot smoke like disoriented hikers in a foggy valley: *How is love*

*different from lust? Does evil exist?* Bix was halfway through his PhD by the time Lizzie moved in with him, and he'd already had those conversations in high school and his first couple of years at Penn. His present nostalgia was for what he'd felt *overhearing* Lizzie and her friends from his perch before his SPARCstation computer linked by a modem to the Viola World Wide Web: a secret, ecstatic knowledge that the world these undergrads were so busy defining, in 1992, would soon be obsolete.

Gregory nursed. Lizzie drowsed. "Can we?" Bix pressed. "Have a conversation like that?"

"*Now?*" She looked drained—was being drained before his eyes! Bix knew she would rise at six to deal with the kids while he meditated and then began his calls to Asia. He felt a wave of desperation. Whom could he talk with in that casual, wide-open, studenty way that people talked in college? Anyone working at Mandala would try, in some sense, to please him. Anyone not at Mandala would presume an agenda, possibly a test—a test whose reward would be employment at Mandala! His parents, sisters? He'd never talked to them that way, much as he loved them.

When Lizzie and Gregory were fully asleep, Bix carried his son down the hall to his toddler bed. He decided to get dressed again and go outside. It was after eleven. It violated his board's security requirements for him to walk New York's streets alone at any hour, much less after dark, so he avoided the trademark deconstructed zoot suit he'd just taken off (inspired by the ska bands he'd loved in high school) and the small leather fedora he'd worn since leaving NYU fifteen years ago to assuage the weird exposure he'd felt after cutting off his dreads. He unearthed from his closet a camouflage army jacket and a pair of scuffed boots and entered the Chelsea night bareheaded, bridling at the cold breeze on his scalp—now bald at the crown, it was true. He was about to wave at the camera for the guards to let him back in so he could grab the hat, when he noticed a street vendor on the corner of Seventh Avenue. He walked down Twenty-first Street to the stall and tried on a black wool beanie, checking his look in a small round mirror affixed to the side of the stall. He appeared utterly ordinary in the beanie, even to himself. The vendor accepted his five-dollar bill as he would have



anyone's, and the transaction flooded Bix's heart with impish delight. He'd come to expect recognition wherever he went. Anonymity felt new.

It was early October, a razor of cold in the breeze. Bix walked uptown on Seventh Avenue intending to turn around after a few blocks. But walking in the dark felt good. It returned him to the East Seventh Street years: those occasional nights, early on, when Lizzie's parents visited from San Antonio. They believed she was sharing the apartment with her friend Sasha, also an NYU sophomore, a ruse Sasha corroborated by doing laundry in the bathroom the day Lizzie's parents came to see the apartment at the start of fall semester. Lizzie had been raised in a world oblivious to Black people except those who served and caddied at her parents' country club. So frightened was she of their presumptive horror at her living with a Black boyfriend that Bix was banished from their bed during her parents' first visits, even though they stayed in a midtown hotel! It didn't matter; they would *just know*. So Bix had walked, occasionally collapsing in the engineering lab under the guise of pulling an all-nighter. The walks had left a body memory: a dogged imperative to keep going despite his resentment and exhaustion. It sickened him to think he'd put up with it—although he felt it justified, on some cosmic balance sheet, the fact that Lizzie now managed every facet of their domestic lives so that he could work and travel as he pleased. The legion of good things that had come to him since could be seen as recompense for those walks. Still, *why?* Was the sex really that good? (Well, yes.) Was his self-esteem so low that he'd indulged his white girlfriend's magical thinking without protest? Had he enjoyed being her illicit secret?

None of that. What had fueled Bix's indulgence, his endurance, was the thrall of his Vision, which burned with hypnotic clarity on those nights of slogging exile. Lizzie and her friends barely knew what the Internet was in 1992, but Bix could feel the vibrations of an invisible web of connection forcing its way through the familiar world like cracks riddling a windshield. Life as they knew it would soon shatter and be swept away, at which point everyone would rise together into a new metaphysical sphere. Bix had imagined it like the Last Judgment paintings whose reproductions he used to collect, but without hell. The opposite: disembodied, he believed, Black people would be delivered from the hatred that hemmed and stymied them in the physical world. At last they

could move and gather at will, without pressure from the likes of Lizzie's parents: those faceless Texans who opposed Bix without knowing he existed. The term "social media" wouldn't be coined to describe Mandala's business for almost a decade, but Bix had conceived of it long before he brought it to pass.

He'd kept the utopian fantasy to himself, thank God—it looked comically naive from a 2010 perspective. But the Vision's basic architecture—both global and personal—had proved correct. Lizzie's parents attended (stiffly) their wedding in Tompkins Square Park in 1996, but no more stiffly than Bix's own parents, for whom proper nuptials did not include a mage, jugglers, or fast fiddling. When the kids started coming, everyone relaxed. Since Lizzie's father died last year, her mother had taken to calling *him* late at night when she knew Lizzie would be asleep, to talk about the family: Would Richard, their oldest, like to learn to ride horses? Would the girls enjoy a Broadway musical? In person, his mother-in-law's Texas twang grated on Bix, but there was no denying the zing of satisfaction her same voice, disembodied at night, afforded him. Every word they exchanged through the ether was a reminder that he'd been right.

The East Seventh Street conversations ended on a single morning. After a night of partying, two of Lizzie's closest friends went swimming in the East River, and one was carried away by a current and drowned. Lizzie's parents had been visiting at the time, a circumstance that chanced to place Bix near the tragedy. He'd run into Rob and Drew in the wee hours in the East Village and done E with them, and the three of them had crossed the overpass to the river together, at sunrise. The impulsive swim happened after Bix had gone home, farther down the river. Although he'd repeated every detail about that morning for the police inquest, it was vague to him now. Seventeen years had passed. He could hardly picture the two boys.

He turned left on Broadway and followed it all the way up to 110th Street—his first such perambulation since becoming famous over a decade ago. He'd never spent much time in the neighborhood around Columbia, and something appealed to him about its hilly streets and grand prewar apartment buildings. Gazing up at the lighted windows of one, Bix thought he could practically hear a potency of ideas simmering behind it.

On his way to the subway (another first-in-a-decade), he paused at a lamppost feathered with paper flyers advertising lost pets and used furniture. A printed poster caught his eye: an on-campus lecture to be given by Miranda Kline, the anthropologist. Bix was deeply familiar with Miranda Kline, and she with him. He'd encountered her book, *Patterns of Affinity*, a year after forming Mandala, and its ideas had exploded in his mind like ink from a squid, and made him very rich. The fact that MK (as Kline was affectionately known in his world) deplored the uses Bix and his ilk had made of her theory only sharpened his fascination with her.

A handwritten flyer was stapled alongside the poster: "Let's Talk! Asking Big Questions Across Disciplines in Plain Language." An introductory meeting was scheduled to follow Kline's lecture three weeks later. Bix felt a quickening at the coincidence. He took a picture of the poster and then, just for fun, tore off one of the paper tabs from the bottom of "Let's Talk" and slipped it into his pocket, marveling at the fact that, even in the new world he'd helped to make, people still taped pages to lampposts.

## 2

Three weeks later, he found himself on the eighth floor of one of those stately, faded apartment buildings around Columbia University—possibly the very one he'd admired from below. The apartment bore a pleasing resemblance to what Bix had imagined: worn parquet floors, smudged white moldings, framed engravings and small sculptures (the hosts were art history professors) hanging on the walls and over doorways, tucked among rows of books.

Apart from the hosts and one other couple, all eight "Let's Talk" attendees were strangers to one another. Bix had decided to forgo Miranda Kline's lecture (presuming he could have finagled entry); her antipathy toward him made it seem wrong to attend, even in disguise. His disguise was "Walter Wade," graduate student in electrical engineering—in other words, Bix himself, seventeen years ago. What gave him the chutzpah to pose as a graduate student all these years later was the confidence that he looked much younger at forty-one

than most white people did. But he'd erred in assuming that the other discussion group members would be white: Portia, one of their art historian hosts, was Asian, and there was a Latina animal studies professor from Brazil. Rebecca Amari, the youngest, a PhD candidate in sociology (the only other student besides "Walter Wade"), was ethnically ambiguous and, he suspected, Black—there'd been a twinge of recognition between them. Rebecca was also disarmingly pretty, a fact heightened, not muted, by her Dick Tracy eyeglasses.

Luckily, Bix had marshaled other tools of identity concealment. Online, he'd purchased a headscarf with dreadlocks emerging from the back. The price was exorbitant but the dreads looked and felt real, and their weight between his shoulder blades was like the touch of a ghost. He'd known that weight for many years, and liked having it back.

When everyone had settled onto couches and chairs and introduced themselves, Bix, unable to repress his curiosity, said, "So. What was she like, Miranda Kline?"

"Surprisingly funny," said Ted Hollander, Portia's art historian husband. He looked to be in his late fifties, a generation older than Portia. Their toddler daughter had already charged into the living room pursued by an undergraduate babysitter. "I thought she'd be dour, but she was almost playful."

"What makes her dour is people stealing her ideas," said Fern, dean of the women's studies department and rather dour herself, Bix thought.

"People have used her ideas in ways she didn't intend," Ted said. "But I don't think even Kline calls it theft."

"She calls it 'perversion,' doesn't she?" Rebecca asked tentatively.

"I was surprised by her beauty," said Tessa, a young professor of dance whose husband, Cyril (mathematics), was also in attendance. "Even at sixty."

"Ahem," Ted said good-naturedly. "Sixty isn't so very ancient."

"Is her appearance relevant?" Fern challenged Tessa.

Cyril, who took Tessa's part in everything, bristled. "Miranda Kline would say it was relevant," he said. "More than half the *Affinity Traits* in her book have to do with physical appearance."

"*Patterns of Affinity* can probably explain each of our reactions to Miranda Kline," Tessa said.

Despite assenting murmurs, Bix was pretty sure that, apart from himself (and he wasn't telling), only Cyril and Tessa had read Kline's masterwork, a slender monograph containing algorithms that explained trust and influence among members of a Brazilian tribe. "The Genome of Inclinations," it was often called.

"It's sad," Portia said. "Kline is better known for having had her work co-opted by social media companies than for the work itself."

"If it hadn't been co-opted, there wouldn't have been five hundred people in that auditorium," said Eamon, a cultural historian visiting from the University of Edinburgh and writing a book on product reviews. Eamon's long deadpan face seemed to shield an illicit excitement, Bix thought, like a generic house containing a meth lab.

"Maybe fighting for the original intent of her work is a way of staying connected to it—of owning it," said Kacia, the Brazilian animal studies professor.

"Maybe she'd have some new theories by now if she wasn't so busy fighting over the old one," Eamon countered.

"How many seminal theories can one scholar produce in a lifetime?" Cyril asked.

"Indeed," Bix murmured, and felt the stirring of a familiar dread.

"Especially if she started late?" Fern added.

"Or had children," said Portia, with an anxious glance at her daughter's toy stove in the living room corner.

"That's why Miranda Kline started late," Fern said. "She had two daughters back-to-back, and the husband left her while they were in diapers. Kline is his name, not hers. Some kind of record producer."

"That is fucked up," Bix said, forcing out the profanity as part of his disguise. He was known *not* to curse; his mother, a sixth-grade grammar teacher, had heaped such withering scorn on the repetitive dullness and infantile content of profanity that she'd managed to annul its transgressive power. Later, Bix had relished the distinction that not cursing gave him from other tech leaders, whose foulmouthed tantrums were infamous.

"Anyway, the husband is dead," Fern said. "To hell with him."

“Ooh, a retributivist among us,” Eamon said with a suggestive waggle of eyebrows. Despite the stated goal of using “plain language,” the professors were helplessly prone to academic-ese; Bix could imagine Cyril and Tessa’s pillow talk including terms like “desideratum” and “purely notional.”

Rebecca caught his eye and Bix grinned—as heady a sensation as taking off his shirt. At his fortieth-birthday party last year, he’d been presented with a glossy pamphlet entitled “Bixpressions” that codified, with photographs, a system of meanings assigned to barely perceptible shifts of his eyes, hands, and posture. Back when he was the only Black PhD student in NYU’s engineering lab, Bix had found himself laughing hard at other people’s jokes and trying to make them laugh, a dynamic that left him feeling hollow and depressed. After getting his PhD, he cut out laughing at work, then cut out smiling, and cultivated instead an air of hyperattentive absorption. He listened, he witnessed, but with almost no visible response. That discipline had intensified his focus to a pitch that he was convinced, in retrospect, had helped him outwit and outmaneuver the forces aligned in readiness to absorb him, co-opt him, shunt him aside and replace him with the white men everyone expected to see. They had come for him, of course—from above and from below, from inside and from every side. Sometimes they were friends; sometimes he’d trusted them. But never too much. Bix anticipated each campaign to undermine or unseat him long before it coalesced, and he had his answer ready when it did. They couldn’t get in front of him. He gave some of them jobs in the end, harnessing their wily energies to advance his work.

His own father had regarded Bix’s rise with wariness. A company man who wore the silver watch he’d been presented at his retirement from a managerial role at a heating and cooling corporation outside Philadelphia, Bix’s father had *defended* Mayor Goode’s decision to bomb the house of the MOVE “slobs” who “put the mayor in an impossible position” (his father’s words) in 1985. Bix was sixteen, and the fights he’d had with his father over that bombing, and the resulting destruction of two city blocks, had opened a chasm between them that never quite closed. Even now he felt the whiff of his father’s disapproval—for having overreached, or become a celebrity (and thereby a target), or failed to heed his father’s lectures (delivered liberally to this day from the helm of a small

motorboat his father used to fish along the Florida coast), whose refrain, to Bix's ears, was: *Think small or get hurt*.

"I wonder," Rebecca mused a little shyly, "if what happened to Miranda Kline's theory makes her a tragic figure. I mean, in the Ancient Greek sense."

"Interesting," Tessa said.

"We must have the *Poetics*," Portia said, and Bix watched in amazement as Ted rose from his chair to look for a physical copy. None of these academics seemed to have so much as a BlackBerry, much less an iPhone—in 2010! It was like infiltrating a Luddite underground! Bix got up, too, ostensibly to help Ted search, but really for an excuse to look around the apartment. Built-in bookshelves lined every wall, even the hallway, and he ambled among these examining the spines of oversize hardcover art books and old yellowed paperbacks. Faded photographs were scattered among the books in small frames: little boys grinning outside a rambling house among piles of raked leaves, or snowdrifts, or heavy summer greenery. Boys with baseball bats, soccer balls. Who could they be? The answer arrived in a photo of a much younger Ted Hollander hoisting one of those boys to place a star upon a Christmas tree. So the professor had a previous life—in the suburbs, or maybe the country, where he'd raised sons before the arrival of digital photography. Had Portia been his student? The age spread was suggestive. But why assume that Ted had chucked his old life? Maybe that life had chucked him.

Could you start again *without* chucking everything?

The question intensified Bix's dread of minutes before, and he retreated to the bathroom to ride it out. An age-splotched mirror hung above a bulbous porcelain sink, and he sat on the toilet cover to avoid it. He shut his eyes and focused on his breathing. His original Vision—that luminous sphere of interconnection he'd conceived during the East Seventh Street years—had become the business of Mandala: implementing it, expanding it, finessing it, monetizing it, selling it, sustaining it, improving it, refreshing it, ubiquitizing it, standardizing it, and globalizing it. Soon that work would be complete. And then? He'd long been aware of a suggestive edge in the middle distance of his mental landscape, beyond which his next vision lay in wait. But whenever he tried to peek beyond that edge, his mind went white. At first he'd approached

that pale expanse with curiosity: Was it icebergs? A climate-related vision? The blank curtain of a theatrical vision or the empty screen of a cinematic one? Gradually, he began to sense that the whiteness was not a substance but an absence. It was nothing. Bix had no vision beyond the one he'd nearly exhausted.

This knowledge arrived decisively on a Sunday morning a few months after his fortieth birthday as he lounged in bed with Lizzie and the kids, and the jolting horror of it made him bolt to the bathroom and vomit in secret. The absence of a new vision destabilized his sense of everything he'd done; what was it worth if it led to nothing—if, by forty, he was reduced to buying or stealing the rest of his ideas? The notion gave him a haunted, hunted feeling. *Had* he overreached? In the year since that awful morning, the Anti-Vision had shadowed him, sometimes barely perceptible but never entirely disappearing, whether he was walking his kids to school or dining at the White House, as he'd done four times in the year and a half since Barack and Michelle came in. He could be addressing an audience of thousands, or in bed helping Lizzie to achieve her elusive orgasm, when the ominous vacancy would begin to drone at him, harbinger of a void that harried and appalled him. More than once he'd pictured himself clutching Lizzie and whimpering, "Help me. I'm finished." But Bix Bouton couldn't say such a thing ever, to anyone. Above all, he had to maintain; fulfill his roles of husband, father, boss, tech icon, obedient son, major political contributor, and indefatigably attentive sexual partner. The man who longed to return to the university, in hopes of provoking a fresh revelation to shape the remainder of his life, would have to be a different man.

He returned to the living room to find Cyril and Tessa poring over a volume with carnal transport, as if it were a tub of ice cream. "You found it," Bix said, and Tessa grinned, holding up a volume of Aristotle from the same "Great Books" set his parents had purchased along with their treasured *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Bix had reverently consulted the *Britannica* as a kid, quoting from it in school reports on cannibals and hemlock and Pluto; reading the animal entries purely for pleasure. Four years ago, when his parents moved into their modest Florida condo—having refused his help to buy a larger one, out of pride (his father) and modesty (his mother)—Bix boxed up those volumes and left them on the sidewalk outside the West Philadelphia home where he'd grown up.



In the new world he'd helped to make, no one would ever need to open a physical encyclopedia.

"In my reading of the Aristotle," Tessa said, "—mind you, I'm a dance professor, there are probably a million scholarly pages on this—but Miranda Kline is *not* a tragic figure. For her to be Tragic-tragic, the people who appropriated her theory would have had to be related to her. That would increase the betrayal and the dramatic irony."

"Also, didn't she *sell* the theory? Or the algorithms?" Kacia asked.

"I think there's a mystery around that," Portia said. "Someone sold it, but not Kline."

"It was her intellectual property," Fern said. "How could anyone else have sold it?"

As one of the purchasers of Kline's algorithms, Bix squirmed in a state of squeamish duplicity. He was relieved when Ted said, "Here's a different question: Miranda Kline's algorithms have helped social media companies to predict trust and influence, and they've made a fortune off them. Is that necessarily bad?"

Everyone turned to him in surprise. "I'm not saying it *isn't* bad," Ted said. "But let's not take that for granted, let's examine it. If you look at baseball, every action is measurable: the speed and type of pitches, who gets on base and how. The game is a dynamic interaction among human beings, but it can also be described quantitatively, using numbers and symbols, to someone who knows how to read them."

"Are you such a person?" Cyril asked incredulously.

"He is such a person," Portia said with a laugh, slipping an arm around her husband.

"My three sons played Little League," Ted said. "Call it Stockholm syndrome."

"Three?" Bix said. "I thought there were two. In your pictures."

"Scourge of the middle son," Ted said. "Everyone forgets poor Ames. Anyway, my point is that quantification, per se, doesn't ruin baseball. In fact, it deepens our understanding of it. So why are we so averse to letting *ourselves* be quantified?"

Bix knew, from his cursory research online, that Ted Hollander's academic success had come in 1998, the same year Bix incorporated Mandala. Already midcareer, Ted published *Van Gogh, Painter of Sound*, which found correlations between Van Gogh's types of brushstroke and the proximity of noisemaking creatures like cicadas, bees, crickets, and woodpeckers—whose microscopic traces had been detected in the paint itself.

"Ted and I disagree about this," Portia said. "I think that if the point of quantifying human beings is to profit from their actions, it's dehumanizing—Orwellian, even."

"But science *is* quantification," Kacia said. "That's how we solve mysteries and make discoveries. And with each new step, there is always the worry that we might be 'crossing the line.' It used to be called blasphemy, but now it's something more vague that boils down to *knowing too much*. For example, in my lab we've begun to externalize animal consciousness—"

"I'm sorry," Bix interrupted, thinking he'd misheard. "You're doing what?"

"We can upload an animal's perceptions," Kacia said. "Using brain sensors. For example, I can capture a portion of a cat's consciousness and then view it with a headset exactly as if I am the cat. Ultimately, this will help us to learn how different animals perceive and what they remember—basically, how they think."

Bix tingled with sudden alertness.

"The technology is still very crude," Kacia said. "But already, there is controversy: Are we *crossing a line* by breaching the mind of another sentient creature? Are we opening a Pandora's box?"

"We're back to the problem of free will," Eamon said. "If God is omnipotent, does that make us puppets? And if we are puppets, are we better off knowing that or not?"

"To hell with God," Fern said. "I'm worried about the Internet."

"By which you mean an all-seeing, all-knowing entity that may be predicting and controlling your behavior, even when you think you're choosing for yourself?" Eamon asked with a sly glance at Rebecca. He'd been flirting with her all night.

"Ah!" Tessa said, seizing Cyril's hand. "This is getting interesting."

Bix left Ted and Portia's apartment ablaze with hope. He'd felt a shift in himself at points during the discussion, an arousal of thought that seemed familiar from long ago. He rode the elevator down with Eamon, Cyril, and Tessa while the others lagged behind, looking at some plaster reliefs Ted had bought on a trip to Naples decades before. Outside the building, Bix idled in a circle of small talk, unsure how to break away without seeming rude. He was reluctant to let it be known he was heading downtown; would a Columbia graduate student *live* downtown?

It turned out that Eamon was walking west and Cyril and Tessa were taking the train to Inwood, having been priced out of the neighborhood around Columbia and unable, as assistant professors, to get faculty housing. Bix reflected guiltily on his five-story townhouse. The professors had mentioned that they were childless, and one side of Cyril's wire-rimmed glasses was held together with a paper clip. But there was a crackle of conductivity between these two; apparently, ideas were enough.

Buoyed by a sense that he could go anywhere as Walter Wade, Bix strode in the direction of Central Park. But the half-bare trees silhouetted against a sallow sky put him off before he reached the entrance. He wished it were snowing; he loved snowy nights in New York. He longed to lie down beside Lizzie and whichever kids had been washed, by nightmares or nursing, into their oceanic bed. It was after eleven. He doubled back to Broadway and got on the 1 train, then noticed an express at Ninety-sixth and switched, hoping to overtake a faster local. From his Walter backpack, he unearthed another disguise element: the copy of *Ulysses* he'd read in graduate school with the explicit aim of acquiring literary depth. What the tome had delivered concretely was Lizzie, in whom (through a calculus Miranda Kline surely could have explained) the combination of James Joyce and waist-length dreads provoked irresistible sexual desire. The calculus on Bix's end had involved a pair of tan patent-leather boots that went higher than Lizzie's knees. He'd kept *Ulysses* as a romantic artifact, although its worn look derived more from the passage of years than rereading. He opened it randomly.

“—*Eureka!* Buck Mulligan cried. *Eureka!*”

As he read, Bix began to feel that he was being watched. The sensation was so familiar from his normal life that he was slow to react, but at last he looked up. Rebecca Amari sat at the opposite end of the subway car, observing him. He smiled at her and raised a hand. She did likewise, and he was relieved to find that it seemed okay to sit apart in friendly mutual acknowledgment. Or was it okay? Maybe it was antisocial to follow several hours of lively group discussion with a distant nonverbal greeting. Bix so rarely had to contend with questions of ordinary social etiquette, he'd forgotten the rules. *When in doubt, do the polite thing*; he'd internalized this dictum from his scrupulously polite mother too decisively to unlearn it. Reluctantly, he put away *Ulysses* and crossed the car to Rebecca, taking the vacant seat beside her. This felt instantly wrong—they were touching from knee to shoulder! Or was total body contact the norm for people who took the subway? Blood flashed into his face with such force it gave him vertigo. He rebuked himself: When mundane social interactions became heart-attack-inducing, something was wrong. Fame had made him soft.

“You live downtown?” he managed to ask.

“Meeting friends,” she said. “You?”

“Same.”

In that moment, Bix noticed his stop—Twenty-third Street—flying past the window; he'd forgotten he was on an express. He wondered if Rebecca would alight at the next stop, Fourteenth Street, en route to the district known as MALANDA, for Mandala-land. Bix had opened his new campus there the year after 9/11, and in eight years it had expanded into factory buildings, warehouses, and whole stands of rowhouses, until people joked that when you turned on the taps below West Twentieth Street, Mandala water poured out. As the train approached Fourteenth Street, Bix considered getting out and just walking home, but crossing his own campus in disguise seemed perversely risky. A downtown local was pulling in; he decided to take it one more stop and double back on an uptown local.

“You getting out here?” Rebecca asked as they both left the train.

“Just switching.”

“Oh—me, too.”