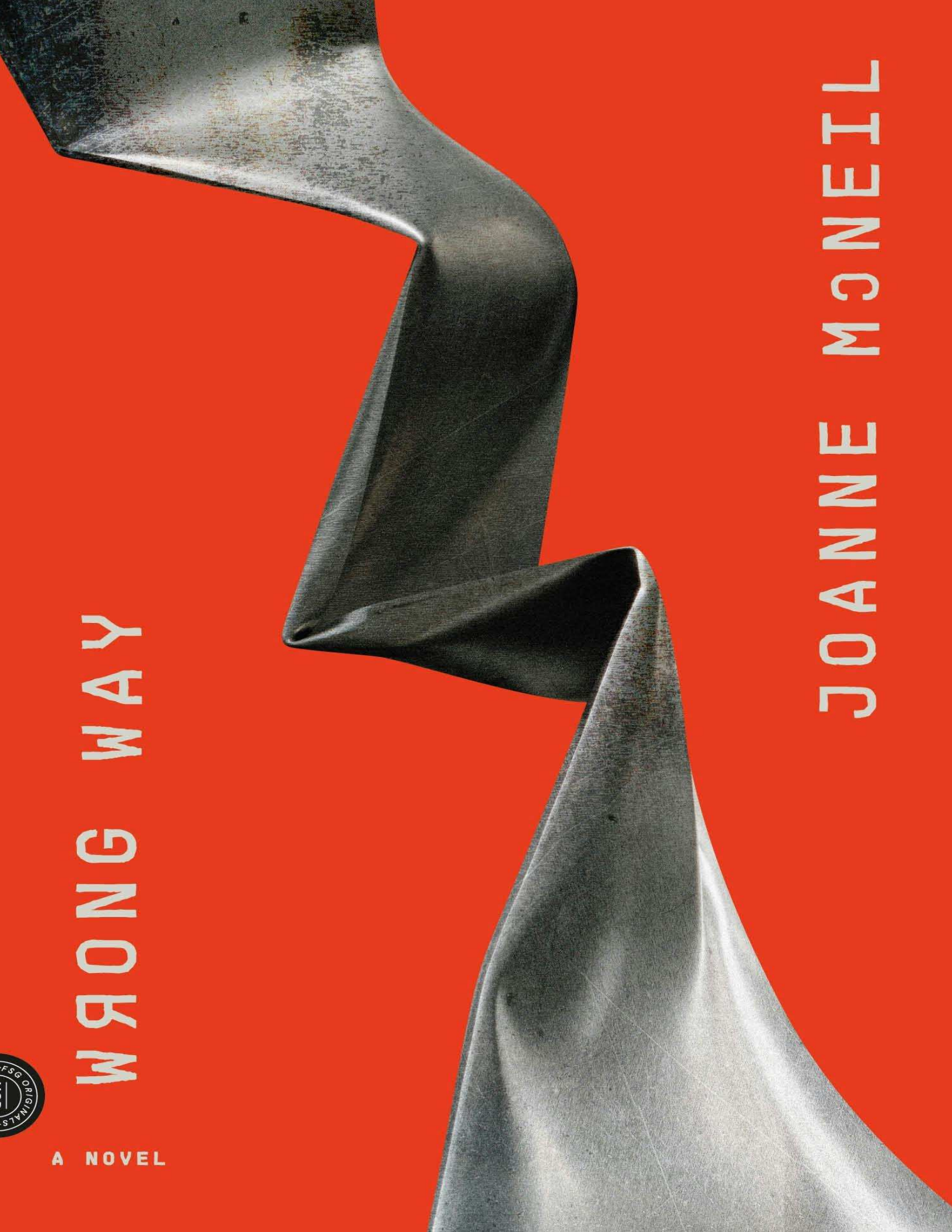




WRONG WAY YAWGNORM

A NOVEL

JOANNE MCNEIL



Wrong Way >>>
Wrong Way

Joanne McNeil

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Farrar, Straus and Giroux New York

[Begin Reading](#)

[Table of Contents](#)

[A Note About the Author](#)

[Copyright Page](#)

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Some of them were good jobs. All of them were odd. Each was better than nothing, but it's true, some were not bad and a few jobs were even good. A steady paycheck and a sense of purpose made all the difference.

There were those evenings and weekends behind the jewelry counter at Cedars department store. It was good. She could walk there. That's what everyone wants, right? To walk to work. She didn't know it then. The walk was unscenic alongside traffic that choked at splintering intersections through a district of thin streets laid down sometime late in the seventeenth century. First a cow hoofed it, disrupted a field and kicked up dandelions and weeds. Then a path was set, and, in turn, it became a dirt cartway before it was paved with granite sett. Bluestone sidewalks came later, and even later, a blacktop layer. The old stones underneath, buried for decades, now reveal themselves to the modern world at the street corners where the asphalt is cracked.

Downtown had the density of a city neighborhood and none of the sprawl of the suburb it was, but it was no city. Each shop had the same olive lighting, the same eggs-and-sawdust smell and old circulars from *The Patriot Ledger*, stepped on and crusted over where the threshold ramps met the sidewalk. There was a family-owned hardware store, a package store, and a store that sold crystal figures and stationery—Christian stuff, Bible verses carved in pewter, and wind chimes and dream catchers, possibly, but it was hard to tell from the window display. Once she went inside the army navy store because a magazine said that's where you could get nice peacoats for cheap. They had no peacoats. Or maybe they did, she didn't want to ask or stick around long. There were three people inside hanging around the cash register and they all looked like old vets.

She would cross at the Cumberland Farms next to Stoughton's lone

Chinese restaurant. Cedars glowed like a fallen star that crashed into the parking lot, a beacon of warm light in the evening fog beaming through the frosted-glass brick that wrapped around the exterior. Grid patterns and shapes were painted on the walls in primary colors like trigonometry homework completed with a four-color Bic. The orderly displays inside summoned a clientele just as structured. It was a catalog showroom. Customers knew what they wanted before they got there. Sometimes they went to the store to see an object in person that they had circled in the glossy wish book that arrived at their front doors with a thud like the Yellow Pages. There would be a specific model of vacuum cleaner or a top-of-the-line car phone in a zip-up bag that they were curious about. They'd find the right department, decide to make a purchase or not, and then return to their cars somewhere in the pothole-speckled lot. Nurses bought Keds sneakers, sometimes three pairs of the same style at a time. Guys from the auto body shop across the road might stop in for replacement pliers. No one experienced the store from one end to the other except for the children who scurried off when their moms asked one of the sales associates about a digital alarm clock warranty or their dads checked the prices of the coffee makers in stock. But even those kids tended to flock to the same place—the lighting department. They'd find the best spot: looking up from underneath the display of chandeliers with stained glass torch lamps in staggered heights and ceramic table lamps crowding the shelves on either side.

There was an office in the center of the building, a place the staff called the “heart” of the store. In these secret rooms, the floors were solid white tile and dusty. The walls were plain. She'd tap in at the punch clock and stuff a paper bag with her name on it with the other paper bags in the mini fridge in the kitchen where the lights constantly flickered off and on.

Her heels would tap gently on the tiles as she followed the central artery toward her station. Thin red dotted lines and thick blue squares accenting the checkerboard floors like trail markers. The fluorescent lights blanched the counter vitrines from a distance. She felt like an actor in a stage play; a leading role in a team effort and public-facing too. Curtain up was when she typed in her code for the cash register: 7485. Her department was in between hardware and cosmetics. At the start of her shift, she could smell the metallic of brand-new wrenches and synthetic tuberose house perfume on either side; it felt right for the glittering baubles pinned to groves on beige velvet slabs,

beautiful small things locked in glass like tropical fish in an aquarium.

She carried the vitrines key on a neon spiral lanyard around her wrist. It made her feel important.

The job was dull most of the time. Dull is not bad. If it had been an actual theater performance, she would have had to stand around and wait through rehearsals and breaks too. She felt safe behind the counter. No one could get too close to her.

The best customers were the people who bought pendants. That's a neutral gift. Middle-aged women would buy silver stars on silver chains for their best friends. There were pin-size ladybug pendants that grandmothers liked to get for their grandchildren. No one ever bought the Hasbro charm necklace with dangling Monopoly pieces, but some of the kids, who wandered to the counter on their own from the VCR section or the lawn mower display, would come by and ask for it.

“Lemme!!” shouted an unaccompanied four-year-old, her eyes focused on the brassy chain with a slight tangle between the wheelbarrow charm and Scottie dog. Teresa didn't mind it. She asked the little girl to turn around, secured the clasp, and let her hold the old-fashioned hand mirror that they kept behind the counter, so the child could admire the shiny pieces around her neck.

Bracelets were boring. It was exhausted-looking men in suits who would arrive at the store at quarter to six and ask to see the “tennis bracelets.” They would quickly decide on one of several identical thin chains with some ambivalence and run out once they paid. Rings were something else: statement pieces, tended for sentimental reasons. She sold about three claddagh rings a week. All the customers were buying for someone else, so they often asked for her opinion of the inventory. She didn't like Cedars jewelry—or any jewelry, or anything unnecessary—but she studied it all in the pamphlets tucked under the register that explained cuts and clarity. She learned every birthstone and remembered the advice from her coworkers, things like how customers liked to pretend that sapphire was the gemstone for December. Just let them.

“You're not going to find anything nicer than that,” she'd say. That was one of her lines. She sold six engagement rings and only two of the six men tried to flirt with her. Each ring was about a forty-dollar commission.

She thought, when the first commission on an engagement ring sale hit

her paycheck, that she was lucky. By the sixth ring, she figured she was going to be the kind of person who would never struggle with money. It would just happen and come easily. Already she was making it.

She wore no rings, no earrings, nothing herself. The customers never seemed to notice. But when she first started, she tried on jewelry when no one was looking. She'd slide an engagement ring onto her left ring finger and then onto her right. It wasn't in the pamphlets, which hand the ring was for; on either hand, the diamonds always looked wrong on the girl's finger. In the gemstone vitrine, there was a horizontal egg-shaped garnet ring that looked antique. She liked it enough and thought it would be a nice keepsake kind of thing to have to remember this moment in time. It was fifty-six dollars, a lot, but her plan was to buy it after her tenth engagement ring commission and she'd still have all that money left over. The store discount was 20 percent off; maybe, she thought, she'd even get to keep the commission if she rang it up herself.

On her fifteen-minute break, she strolled through the aisles with color swatches for house paint. She daydreamed about living on her own and painting the ceiling a specific shade of cloudy powder blue: Windmill Wings. She had another spiral wristlet with a key for the closet-size room behind the juniors section. There, she'd switch out VHS tapes that played on nine televisions mounted above racks of jeans and cropped T-shirts. Each tape played music videos for two hours. On one VHS player, she'd enter a new tape, and on the other, she'd set the completed tape to rewind. Sometimes the key-cutting machine in hardware would screech over the music. Elsewhere there were speakers constantly playing wordless music that was diaphanous and jazzy. She only noticed it when the televisions stopped and it was time to switch out the VHS tapes.

Her boss seemed so old. He was only twenty-five, but he was married, but he also didn't act like it. There were a few times she didn't like the way he looked at her, but even contemplating this many years later, in the pool, lap sixteen, she thought that look she didn't like was that of a disgruntled vaunter who would have preferred to be, as he probably is today, selling snowmobiles or pontoons or something bigger, with the risks and rewards to show for it. Absent any real power, he focused on irrelevant tasks, staging his subordinate like a mannequin and reminding her to smile. This was the first thing a customer would have seen from the center left entrance: a teenage girl

with her dark hair to her waist and a muted smile, dressed in her nicest clothes—plaid skirts, black tights, cardigan sets—clean ensembles made of synthetic fabrics, first-day-back-at-school attire, the clothes she could wear to church; quiet behind a glass counter, under panels of powerful incandescent daylight-mimicking lights.

She loved the thirty minutes between closing and lockup. Counting the cash, then placing it in a leather pouch with the most expensive inventory in the safe. Loved that the store trusted her to do this. When the central lights went out, the whole place felt serene; it was still brighter than anything in town, still a crashed star in the lot. She never did get that garnet ring. She was sixteen years old.

Lap sixteen at the Y is when she would remember this, flip turn, and recall, before seventeen, how the job ended. It was a good job, but those stores don't exist now. Those jobs don't.

Lap seventeen. She was no mannequin there, dressed in a wrinkly and oversized polo with the convenience store logo above the right breast. Hunched over and amorphous, like all the customers, but she was twenty years younger than the youngest among them. She can't remember much of it. Still. Not a bad job. She could walk there.

A good job at eighteen. Lap eighteen. The workplace was good. She got to eat for free in the cafeteria with all the technical workers. Most of them had thick black-frame glasses and severe haircuts. It was some dot-com, some sort of creative agency. It surprised her to see cool-looking people in this suburb—Norwood; she thought people like that all lived in Boston. She was whisked to a tiny room with no windows to read a script in a cubicle in the dark; what it was, she can't remember now, just selling people over the phone on whatever the company was selling. That was not good. But it was good on her lunch breaks. Fresh pastas and salads. Really good food. They asked her for a four-digit PIN to log in to see the call registry. She already remembered 7485. On a ten-key, it was as easy to type as anything at all.

Lap nineteen and careful not to blink so her goggles don't leak. Data entry at the Paper Mason headquarters in a crumbling neo-Romanesque tower in Brockton with an ornate arched roof and graffiti on the sides. It smelled funny in there, like the kitchen fridge needed a deep clean. Another time, they asked for a four-digit pin: 7485. Lap twenty, lap twenty-one, lap twenty-two. Something at the Milton country club. It was only for the summer. Pouring

wine, sweeping up. It was fine, the money was good: minimum wage on paper, a W-2, but she cleaned up in tips. Other jobs. Lap twenty-five is when things changed. That's when the money really made a difference. She lets her mind wander until it's two miles almost, lap fifty-one and out. She can swim longer than her years. Up in the cold air, nothing to hear but splashing and echoes. Toweling off. She removes her cap and squeezes her wet chin-length hair. There were other jobs that were not so good.

Teresa has her head pressed against the window of the white shuttle bus. Her forehead vibrates and her teeth chatter with the rumble. The bus hums into her knees and her feet absorb the trembling floor. The seats feel damp while the AC is cranked to the max against the sound of the engine; all is silent besides. A few of the seat cushions are held together with duct tape. It's morning, early August and already hot at this hour with a faint wind gust that will greet the arrivals when they step off one by one. Just a touch of relief.

Out the window, she can see the same cracked asphalt where she once walked to work in cheap heels. But the summer morning light casts a disorienting haze over the town. It is always fall or winter in Stoughton when Teresa remembers it. Could that be where the strange Bible store once was? She slides closer to the side of the bus as the driver turns the other way.

This could be a good job. At South Station thirty minutes earlier, the fifty passengers in this vehicle had been waiting in an ambiguous crowd, each of them unsure whether they were in the right place; mixed in with strangers who would stay strange—the travelers gripping duffel bags and suitcases on caster wheels, who had stopped to review directions to the hotel, Logan Airport, or wherever happened to be the next leg of their journeys. The expectant workers grazed a few feet from one another as a loose crowd of a couple dozen people grew to a concentrated shape. They were middle-aged, mostly, but some older and some much younger. A diverse crowd, otherwise. Teresa noticed in their faces some expression of anxiety in accord with her own emotional state. She hovered by the side and assumed a space that she estimated would mark an invisible point on an invisible circumference surrounding where the group had gathered.

There was a sudden roar of battered clouds and severed sky. Someone

else, who was standing on that invisible circumference, looked at her and pointed up at two planes.

“Fighter jets,” he said, with a careful foot forward, inching in toward the group. He looked up and frowned a little. “Flying real low.” The jets roared overhead. He shouted, “And loud!”

That’s when the bus arrived. She thought it would be nice to sit on the bus together in silence with him, but there was room for everyone to sit alone.

The bus chugs toward a faint glimmering form ahead while it winds around the new road. This whole place used to be an airport: dead-flat seven hundred acres that hadn’t been in use in thirty years.

The AllOver headquarters is round and glistening like an egg from a benevolent alien species. It is so stunning, so eye-catching, that at first glance, Teresa doesn’t notice the old hangars tucked in the back. Each of them gutted and renovated inside, but the coarse exteriors remain the same. The rough texture of the hangars enhances the luster of the main structure. Crust with shine. A pearl to harvest. It is gorgeous at eye level but nowhere near the picture of futuristic tranquility that AllOver depicted in render images to court the locals back in 2014. Back when her father was alive. He thought it sounded like a good company and someone had to do something with that land. No commercial plot can stay unoccupied forever. It would have been this or a casino, probably, is what he said at the time.

Neighborhood blogs and local papers endlessly circulated the pictures that seemed more like space settlements, actual planets away from the typical new developments like strip malls and mid-market condominiums. They called it “Render Falls,” a nickname that has stuck. Maybe it is because the word “render” was unfamiliar to the people in Stoughton until they saw the images. The word sounded technical and new, just like AllOver was, but the old Stuart Falls Memorial Airport had been an internet-to-physical-world portal too. Teenage drinkers and ruin porn spelunkers would scale the fence with old mattress toppers and thick carpets. They’d post pictures of its blighted eighties business-class splendor to image blogs and Tumblr. Among its decrepit peculiarities was a staircase covered at every step with stacks of ledgers, flight chart maps, spiral notebooks, and canvas binders. Documented at many angles, with various types of camera apps and filters, the spectacle resembled a waterfall of office supplies—the natural wonder that the airport

was originally named for.

Alone in her row, Teresa pulls up the old render images on her phone and counts where the building comes up short. The hangars were razed in the architectural renderings. The render images are richly forested but there are no trees outside and their absence gives the grounds a look of industrial nakedness and severity. In the images, there are hundreds of people around, cut-and-pasted in like paper doll cutouts, active around the campus: crowding at picnic tables and throwing a Frisbee across the lawn. There's a rendered golden retriever with a red bandana running about off-leash. One of the paper-doll render men plays guitar. But there is no one outside her window. No trees and no people. There aren't even structures to accommodate people, like picnic tables or benches. The immaculate grass looks spiky, like it could pierce the soles of your shoes if you were to cross it, with or without a Frisbee. Spike grass—is that a thing? Spike glass? Maybe no one actually works here besides robots.

The shuttle bus slows as it turns into the receiving area. The building catches its white and green trim finish, colors that replicate in particles and swirl along its own surface. An interpretation of the vehicle flickers and darts through the iridescent glass panels, which otherwise reflect the hesitant color of the overcast sky. The shuttle parks at the opal mouth of Render Falls, while it continues to move in flickering reflections. Teresa is the last to get off, and on her way out, her foot catches in the rubber step pad. Her mangled confetti-speck mirror image splashes over the building that she is about to enter. She trips but lands on her feet and spins on her heels to balance. From where she stands, it is all spike grass and gray sky. Render Falls looks like anywhere there ever was.

Looking left, out in the distance, she notices odd trucks, heavy haulers, in a queue to enter a rickety old hangar. Each has a shiny, glinting carriage unit, pearlescent with stylized texture. The trucks remind her of the hermit crabs she had as a kid, their rough bodies like truck bodies. She had always loved picking out iridescent shells at the pet store; pretty new homes for the little weird creatures. The trucks look just as unsuitably matched with their pretty payload coverings. The place feels weird, but weird is not bad. This could be a good job, she thinks again, as she enters the spacious lobby.

They gather under an abstract bronze chandelier shaped like branches and daggers. The floor is marble, milky pink; the same color and glazed-donut

opacity as the interior of the converted office in Marlborough where the AllOver pre-screening took place. Teresa had waited in the stiff chairs in the reception area, across from a teenager on her phone and two retirement-age men in scratched-up work boots and faded jeans. Half the walls were painted gray and the other half were covered in a trippy geode-pattern wallpaper. Everything else was pink.

A woman in a silver shift dress and a full face of makeup called for her and escorted her down the pink hallway. Bethany was her name. Six feet tall in patent leather beige heels. The conservative polish to the representative's attire was all the more striking and strange as she appeared to be no more than a year or two out of school. As they walked together down the hall, Teresa wondered about the spatial frame with narrow passages and closed doors nestled one after the next. It reminded her of a private practice of some kind of medical specialist. When they entered a tiny room and Bethany closed the door, Teresa half expected to change into a smock and step in stirrups. Instead of an examination table, the room's centerpiece was another cumbersome device, unfamiliar to her but evidently designed to receive a full body just the same. It was dark red and slanted from a helmet with telephone cord-like tight spirals that connected to arm straps and two halves of metal and fabric to wrap across each leg. Bethany strapped her in and snapped the visor over her eyes. Through the visor, Teresa could see a digital environment, a picture of this room but sharper; real almost, but crisp at the object edges. The illusion died at those edges.

"Don't overthink it," Bethany said. "This is only a baseline reflex and hand-eye coordination test. There is nothing to win." Teresa was transported from the geode wallpaper to a virtual endless expanse of AllOver pink. The digital environment was shadowless and looked slick, like flatlands covered in strawberry milk.

"Jump over the rings and catch each ball."

Teresa, startled by Bethany's instructions, crouched at her core and loosened her shoulders to prepare for the test. Tennis balls, rendered in impressive detail, shot out to her from the strawberry-milk vanishing point. She snatched at the air with loose fists. The rendered objects evaporated with each successful catch. Teresa was surprised at how easy the test was—maybe she was a natural; even when the tennis balls accelerated and faked out, she was ready. The rings were rings of fire—a facsimile, considerably less

lifelike than in the previous task. What the rendering lacked in photorealism, it made up for in aggression. The fire rings thrust toward her feet in sharklike baited zigzags. A ring charged at her and she jumped up. A success. She could dodge the rings easily, even while she ethered the virtual tennis balls. When the balls and rings vanished into the pastel void, Bethany said she did great and told her where to meet for the shuttle the following week.



They check in with a dark-haired woman at the front desk—nearly identical to Bethany from the pre-screening—who collects their phones and stores them individually in a card catalog-style cabinet. Each little drawer is lined with pink satin to match the floors; the flash of color looks teasing and out of place, like a display case at an upmarket lingerie shop. Some of the trainees brought laptops, which she secures in a lockbox under her desk. Teresa remembers how proud she was locking up the cash and diamond rings in the safe at Cedars that time years ago but not a mile away. Maybe this will be a good job. Crawling up the sides of the wall are cold silver geranium-style flowers snaking their way through vents in a chrome divider. Silver flowers. Metallic flowers. The flowers must be synthetic, but the green leaves and vines look alive.

“Teresa Kelly,” she says. The woman at the front desk scans for her name on the tablet interface. “AO. Stoughton, CR” is embossed on the front of the desk under the AllOver logo. Teresa wonders about it. Shouldn’t it say, “Stoughton, MA”?

She catches the name of the person she was talking to earlier: Al Jin. She notices his hand clutches something in his back pocket after he checks in. Has he held on to his phone? Teresa wonders. She smiles, but he’s looking out at the spike grass through the window.

Before the group is a harried-looking man with flushed skin and pale clothes that suggest an unidentifiable spring vegetable in a CSA basket. He ducks slightly when he enters the lobby, although the doorframe has half a foot on him. Philip is his name. He offers a tight wave to the crowd and walks past the woman at the front desk without saying anything more. Teresa, at this angle, can see his face contort into a grimace in profile.

They follow Philip down a white corridor. It is clean and it smells of

packed dust like the inside of a vacuum. It sounds like compressed air: nothingness with volume, noise-canceling acoustics at super strength exerting a deafening void. The sound of their steps through the hall—fifty-one pairs of feet—dissolves in the overpowering silence.

Through silver sliding doors, they arrive at Turing Hall, the name of one of the old hangars. The floors are painted with white resin. Traffic cones segment a quarter of the space where the group will be working. The other sections of the old hangar are white nothing under ceilings taller than airplanes with exposed joists. In the back, there's a long table with a breakfast buffet: pans of pancakes, bacon, hash browns, and fruit; tea and coffee in silver urns by a tower of mugs; and trays of muffins and other pastries. A nice spread. The kind of breakfast that conferencing executives might expect, not contract workers solicited off Craigslist. Teresa fills her plate with melon and peanut butter on a tiny bagel. It will be a good job, she wants to believe. She has a cup of coffee quickly and refills the cup before taking a seat in one of the electric blue foldout chairs lined up in the center of the space.

“Welcome to AllOver. The experience company,” Philip begins. His voice is amplified by a hidden mic. “Our mission is to connect customers and entertainment and service providers, to empower businesses and content creators to maximize their success, and to make person-to-person experiences and exchanges universally accessible, progressive, and equitable.”

He glances at his notes with a look of practiced solemnity. “Today’s training is held in a sacred place that is traditional Sakimauchheen Ing and Algonquin soil,” he says, quick and mumbly, sure to have mispronounced it. All of AllOver’s meetings and public events begin with a land acknowledgment but Philip has got this one wrong. He had failed to refresh the TribalLandz app on his phone and announced the origin of the suburbs of Philadelphia, which was the last place that he had hosted a training session. Otherwise, he would have said it was Wampanoag territory.

“Everyone in this room has a role to play to make this future our reality. You’re the first New England division of AllOver’s brand-new CR program.”

Those letters again. Initials? No, it doesn’t seem like it, Teresa thinks. She stares at the letters on the screen behind Philip as she would a pair of Scrabble tiles. Ah. “Car” without a vowel. They will be driving after all.

AllOver was founded in 2012, Philip tells the crowd as Teresa picks at the last of her cantaloupe. Muddled daylight washes in through the skylight panels and catches his stringy vegetable hair in a backscatter orb of glow. “If the company were a baby, he’d get behind the wheels this year.

“AllOver is more than a service and experience platform. It’s about community,” Philip continues. “We bridge humanity and enterprise; we shape the digital economy to fit neighborhood-centric needs. AllOver is personal and it is social. Everyone in this room has an account but no two people have the same adventures with our services. Maybe you’re a gamer or you love to travel or order Ethiopian takeout through our app. As a company, we are large, but the connections we offer are intimate and special. Half of all our eight hundred million users have completed a transaction through our platform today. Eighty-seven percent of service-based small businesses route bookings with our calendar and transaction stack. We’re a network of hardworking people united to build a future that benefits us all.” The more he speaks, the more his words seem charged with bitter enthusiasm; a grinding attempt at cheer that grows more pronounced as he compliments the room for fulfilling two of AllOver’s values in hiring: racial diversity and an equal number of women and men. “I see we got a lot of Libras in this room,” he says with a smile that doesn’t look fake. “Good energy.”

★ ★ ★

“No vehicle needed and no driving experience necessary” is all the Craigslist ad had said. Her phone rang an hour after she fired off an email in response. Normally, she’d attach a résumé and cover letter, but she had intuited, given the brevity of the “Drivers Wanted” ad, that it was in her best interest to

respond to it in a quick and casual manner similar to how it was written.

The recruiter described the position in a vague way that made her feel like she had been plucked for an apprenticeship in wheelwrighting or stone masonry but for this century and into the next one. Eight weeks of paid training. There was something appealing about the opportunity to be “trained”; she’d be an expert in something. There would be a clear beginning and an end and after that end a new beginning.

“This is one of our finest clients. I imagine you are familiar with AllOver,” the recruiter said on the phone. A male voice, boldly intoned, he sounded proud of her—this stranger—like she’d won a prize. The company had already conducted a thorough background check on her, which she aced, the recruiter said. Teresa paused to consider the legality of this. AllOver must have scanned their own data. They would know all the airline flights that she had ever taken and every movie theater ticket she had purchased for well over a decade. Every subway ride and museum admission, every haircut and Pilates class. That time she went to Six Flags with former coworkers at an office where she had been temping. She had used AllOver autopay to send her rent directly to her old roommate with his name on the lease. Her YMCA membership had been paid each month in AllCash points. Even her cobbler on Huntington, a shop that’s been in business since 1823, processed her payments with AllOver. What would his great-great-grandfather say? They’d know she’s lived in two states. Unmarried. She once had a dog. They’d know this because she had paid the walker with AllOver and the kennel fees too. They’d have her old Brookline address, her older addresses in Forest Hills and Hyde Park, other addresses in New York, a brief stint back in Stoughton, and the street she lives on now in Brixboro. Teresa, reluctantly, in spite of herself, felt a dash of pride. AllOver could see a substantial part of her life history and they thought she looked okay.

“This is a worker-first company. You’ll be in good hands,” the recruiter continued. AllOver combined efficient logistics with consumer-oriented design and customer service. “There’s an ethics board; *Fortune* magazine ranked it the best Silicon Valley company for diversity, equity, and inclusion; and *Barron’s* called it the world’s most sustainable corporate enterprise. Its staff is unionized. This is a contract position, no benefits, but that’s how everyone gets their foot in the door these days,” he said.

“Could you tell me what a typical day might entail?” Teresa asked,

holding her cellphone close to her mouth, worried the recruiter might otherwise hear the floorboard creaking or the window rattling, as it does whenever cars drive on the rural town road she lives on. The house had belonged to an unmarried great-aunt who left it to her mother. That relative had passed away shortly after her father. The timing was fortuitous despite another layer of grief: her mother, at that time, was facing eviction from the house Teresa grew up in.

Teresa worried the recruiter would ask what she was doing in Brixboro or what the town was like. “There’s a rail trail. I like to go there for a run” was what she might have said, and it’s true, on weekends when it’s nice, she’ll go for a sprint on the old railway corridor, now a thin strip of packed dirt along the brook tented with the branches of maple trees and white pine. Also, there’s a beautiful library made of stone with the year 1843 chiseled in the rounded arch above the doors. The rooms are drafty in the winter, but in this weather it is a good place to work on job applications with a robust Wi-Fi connection. Teresa thought she would stay here three months. Then the gaps between jobs lengthened and her hourly rate stagnated and now it has been over a year. Brixboro is less than ideal, but she could say the same for anywhere she’s lived.

“That’s a billion-dollar question,” the recruiter laughed. “Before I get ahead of myself, you said in the application that you love to drive?”

“Yes, I love to. So this is something like Uber, right?”

“Nothing like that,” he laughed again. “Uber was twentieth-century logistics and prewar infrastructure paired with a smartphone app interface. It was old news inside start-up gift-wrapping and VC investment icing the cake. This is not a cake. It is entirely new.” Training’s twenty-five dollars an hour, he said. “Not bad, and there’s a job guarantee.” Workers will have tremendous flexibility in hours and can expect a grand a week in take-home pay as soon as training ends. “I can’t tell you what it is, but I just know that before long it’s going to be a job that everyone wants. Look, I might be calling you for work a few years down the road.”

Teresa was flattered and skeptical at once.

“Consider it this way: you are getting paid to learn a trade that, to the rest of the world, hasn’t been invented yet,” he said. “You’re a VIP with a backstage pass to a new career. Now are you in?”

She was. Whatever it is, the job is already better than her last five

LinkedIn updates. Most of that work happened in mills: old mill yards, old gristmills, old leather mills, old textile mills. Sometimes they were called that. Woolen Mills was one of her old offices but abstracted from its original purpose in time and determination. The name of the brick building reminded her of owl eyes with the duplicate Os looking down at her from the sign at the front entrance. At least two of her former offices were called “The Old Mill.” Long rigid brick towers sturdy enough to support manufacturing purposes. Each one renovated inside to edgy modern plainness. Some had working water mills on-site. Even in the not-so-great jobs, she enjoyed the sounds of slush and grind in the forecourts of those odd buildings. Sometimes the hallways were decorated with tarnished old equipment made of wheels, levers, bells, and mesh buckets. At a short data-entry post, she had a desk behind the floor showpiece: an old contraption that looked like an ancient birdcage topped with a Brannock Device. Another mill had an eleven-foot-tall power loom wheel on display in the hall. All of the mills had history. Her temporary coworker at a 3D-printing start-up in Lawrence casually mentioned to her that the Bread and Roses Strike happened at that mill more than a hundred years ago. She never saw him again after that. His contract must have ended.

Teresa used to drive to these jobs in her mother’s beige Impreza with a weak FM signal and the AC busted. She would hang her blouse on the headrest of the passenger seat, safe from wrinkles and sweat, and navigate that clunker in a camisole and office attire from the waist down. The windows rolled open, her hair in tendrils flopping across her face, she’d listen to the putt-putt sputter of the old motor on her way to whatever address was listed on the latest guest badge lanyard in the cupholder. Crackle- and static-distorted rock songs from the twentieth century wheezing out from the stereo until she found a spot in the parking lot of whichever mill she was working out of that day.

Some of the mills were almost beautiful inside when the sun hit through the lake-size windows built at a time when a workday depended on natural light.

Inside every office were rows of people dressed in stiff patterned shirts looking at screens. She’d glance over the shoulders of the young women reading articles in the *Harvard Business Review* about the struggles women faced in the workforce or she’d notice the middle-aged men on Facebook