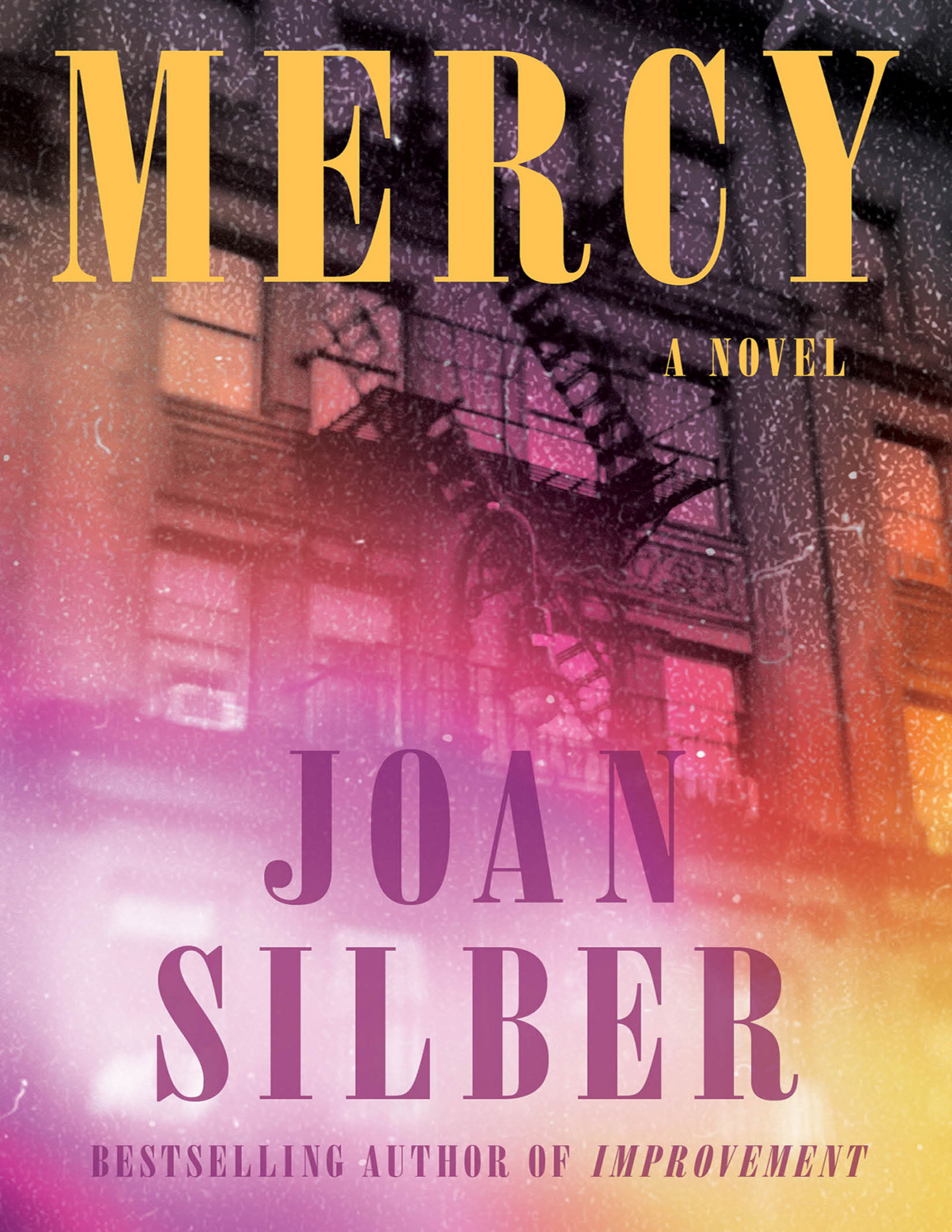
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A NOVEL
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Ivan

MY DAUGHTER KNEW ME AS THE FATHER WHO MET any news by announcing, "We'll deal with it." She understood this (correctly) to mean I'd seen bigger trouble than whatever the pissy little thing at hand was.

What did I think big trouble was? A plague of deadly disease, a flood of rushing waters, a city lost in unbroken darkness? All these things came to pass, in my girl's years of growing up, and we managed. I was always the guy insisting to friends who were in despair or outrage that everything would be okay, keep your shirt on.

I married late. What caught up with me? I might have gone on as I was, a guy in his forties with a decent sex life. I had no need to join up, but Maddie—younger and more urgent—got us tucked into a cozy space together, sheltered. She had me growing delighted feelings about the great convenience of not always starting over, the beauty of being settled. I was fifty when Zoe was born, and the early years with her, that little petulant rapscallion, sat very well with me.

By the time Zoe was in college, she found many occasions to tell me that my generation had fucked up in every major way. We'd ruined the planet, we'd

let a criminal 1 percent own everything, we'd gotten everyone used to constant war. Our current life-form was an invasive species, worse than kudzu, choking out anything around us. My dear daughter. I'd had my own scorn and gloom at her age, but my sullenness seemed now like the frivolous affectation it was.

"What's the worst thing you've ever done?" she asked late at night, just the two of us. We were in the living room of our Brooklyn apartment, done watching Netflix, sitting on the couch eating the last of the ice cream out of the carton.

"Cheating my high school friends at poker," I said. "Lying to your mom about liking her kale salad." I had no interest in giving her a serious answer.

But I knew what the worst thing was. It was an untold bit of personal history and it was staying that way. My business. I knew what I'd been. The details did not bear discussion.

Zoe always complained that there were hardly any pictures of me in my wayward youth. A lame-ass college photo with rimless glasses and a few from the time I spent bumming around Europe or driving a taxi in New York in the seventies. She always made fun of my mustache and sideburns in the Europe ones. "Girls liked them," I told her, which had some degree of truth in it.

If you're an older father, the way you once looked is innately hilarious. But I was glad for the long distance between my coming-of-age and hers. I wanted her safe from mine.

The one picture I liked was of me in London, sitting on a park bench smoking a cigarette. Eddie must have taken it. I'm glowering into the camera, exhaling a cloud of smoke, squinting at whatever's out there. Looking (in my morose way) pleased with myself. I'm not high either.

Eddie and I spent a lot of time in parks. In New York he could amble into almost any park and within ten minutes he knew who was selling what and for how much. London was harder—we didn't come in knowing how to read things—but any drug was cheaper. We did have some cash, our separate savings (me from driving a cab, Eddie from tending bar) that had to last awhile. We hadn't figured out yet what we'd do when it ran out. Something.

Why were we so dedicated to drugs? Eddie would've said that was like asking why anyone likes sex (which not everyone even does). To me, *Because it feels good* was not the answer. What we wanted, in our way, was to go over the edge. Our private elsewhere. We wanted transcendent flings, further steps. *Far out* was the cliché of our era, but to us it meant something for which we had only blunt slang. Not for us the daily grind of the ordinary slob, the nothing-special days and weeks. We were better than that. We liked to talk about our highs, how good they were or not, their particulars.

In New York we had done some of everything, but in London we got to love the local heroin. Guys with our highly conscious views might seem drawn to psychedelics, but they were too much of a production—the flashing coils of light in our fields of vision, the pulsing hallucinated patterns that went on for hours. We liked the simplicity of the ancient poppy, its purer message.

Eddie always did the talking. "What's good these days, my friend?" In London, our local louts on certain corners had supplies from somewhere in Asia, much like what we were used to at home—pale-brownish or almost-white powder, waiting to be cooked in a spoon over a flame and sieved through a wad of surgical cotton. We liked these rituals.

They had beautiful parks in London. It was Eddie's idea to get high and sit on the benches, just looking into the green before us. Eddie, who was more social than I was, asked people about the trees. He was a friendly traveler even in his heavy-lidded state. "What do you call this one?"

An old woman laughed at us for not knowing what a London plane tree was—they were the huge trees looming along every pathway, with splotchy bark like sycamores. (Eddie had grown up in some low-rent suburb in Rhode

Island where they had trees with names. I was from the east Bronx and knew nothing.) “A London plane tree,” the woman said, “will last several hundred years. More than I will. How long do you think you’ll last?”

“Long as they let me,” Eddie said. He was charming her, even with his stoned voice.

“You’re lovely boys,” she said.

In Amsterdam Eddie and I had a difference of opinion about drugs. It was before the era of the city’s coffee shops, with cannabis openly for sale, but anyone could get a contact high from pot smoke just strolling through Vondelpark, where encampments of hippie visitors slept. Heroin, on the other hand, was hard to get. The Dutch were strict—major arrests, heavy sentences. “We’ll go local,” Eddie said. “Grass is good.”

I had heard—you heard a lot of things hanging out in hostels and guesthouses—that Chinese people here sold opium. A racist rumor, but who knew? I’d never smoked opium and was entirely thrilled by the prospect. “You don’t speak Dutch, you don’t speak Chinese,” Eddie said. “This is a plan that won’t end well.”

“Said like the coward you are,” I told him.

And we had a tiff about our different operating systems. I was for ceaseless exploration of inner horizons and unknown territory, and he was just a dopey tourist with a map, watching over his shoulder. Eddie said he was not going to be dared into stupidity and I was on my own on this one.

Fuck him, then. I had no choice but to hit the streets, on the hunt, as if I knew what I was doing. Maybe I did. I’d seen a bunch of Chinese restaurants and gift shops near Nieuwmarkt. Nobody was in the market stalls in the evening, but I saw a skinny Asian kid loitering in the square, and I said, “Hi. So what’s good these days?” Lots of people spoke English. He didn’t answer, even when I repeated myself. I greeted a nearby blond Dutch guy—fatter, older—parking his bike. I said, “Got anything good?” He turned his head away quite definitely. I checked my little Berlitz book and asked a teenager

who passed me, “You have good?” in Dutch. He made a gesture of incomprehension and got the fuck away from me.

I knew what I was. I was a fool on his way to being a junkie. I was near the red-light district too—I could see a girl with teased blond hair in the window on the next corner. What a cartoon of vice I was in. I didn’t want to be here at all.

I kept getting lost trying to find my way back to where we were staying. Was this the same canal or another? It was not the most well-lit city I’d ever been to. Figures came out of the shadows, facing me as I crossed a bridge. They stared, I stared. One of them had a face like a skull. It wasn’t as adorable a town as people said. Quaint old houses and all. I kept guessing wrong about where the fuck I was.

Sometime around three or four in the morning—everything was shut up tight, I hated this city—I read a sign on a wall. It was the name of the street where our guesthouse was! I was laughing from the mercy of it, I could see our skimpy run-down building, but then the front door was locked. I rattled it; I knocked and banged and rattled. An irate woman’s voice called out in Dutch from across the way. What if I slept in the street? Who would mug me? And then the door opened—I almost fell into it—and Eddie was there. “You took your time,” he said. “I was waiting by the desk, but I fell asleep.”

He led me up the rickety flights of stairs to our room, with those cheapskate timed lights switching off on each landing behind us. “So?” he said when we were back in our little chamber. “No success, I take it.”

Did I thank him for waiting up? I did not.

“You were gone forever,” Eddie said. “I was starting to worry.”

“I hate this city.”

“Have a beer. You’ll feel better,” Eddie said, and he reached under his bed and came out with two green glass bottles. Glorious vessels. When had he bought these?

The beer wasn’t cold, of course, but it went down my throat like the golden treasure it was. We loved the beer in Holland.

“I was worried,” Eddie said.

It was an era before we had phones in our pockets. What clumsy, rough, physical lives we led. I'd wandered alone like a poor shepherd on the moors, hours and hours. If I'd been murdered or fallen into a canal, how would Eddie have found me?

He would have. He would've been dogged. Some girl would've helped him. Girls liked him.

"Don't laugh," he said to me that night, "but after a while, I prayed for you."

Eddie was a lapsed Catholic, with some shreds of belief still in him. It was startling to hear he'd tried to contact any god on my behalf. It wouldn't have occurred to me to pray for him—Jews didn't go in for direct intercession, as far as I was ever taught. Maybe we did.

People in our era were starting to have their own versions of religion, leaving out what didn't suit them. Eddie had dropped the Virgin birth, I knew. I thought any decent God would've listened to Eddie. Eddie, of all people.

Eddie had three more bottles under the bed. A man of foresight. We each had another bottle and split the third. I wasn't even sleepy yet.

"Beer has niacin," I said. I'd once had a girlfriend who worked in a health food store. "Other B vitamins too. Riboflavin."

"This trip has been one health improvement after another."

The Egyptians, I happened to know, were big beer drinkers. "They think lucky dudes in the Nile Valley discovered it by mistake," I said, "when the grain they'd gathered did its own fermenting."

"Most interesting things come from mistakes," Eddie said. "Don't you think?"

"If that's true, I have a fabulously interesting life ahead," I said.

It was past dawn, and Eddie had us discussing famous mistake-makers of history. The crew on the *Titanic* who scoffed at those reports of icebergs. The guy at Decca Records who turned down the Beatles in 1962 and signed up Brian Poole and the Tremeloes instead.

I'd had a good night, I thought, as the day was starting, and I could hardly remember the defeat and humiliations I'd visited on my idiot self only hours before. We toasted the babes of Amsterdam, some of whom we did meet later.

Amsterdam was probably good for me, since I did without certain substances for the weeks we were there. We rented bikes and went sailing around their speedy bike paths. Eddie and I were of the opinion that smack (we called it scag too) was not anywhere near as habit-inducing as ill-informed bourgeois propaganda would lead you to believe. Had our first dose gotten us hooked forever? Nope. Had we ever had climbing-the-walls withdrawal symptoms? Not us. In Amsterdam, I was grouchy, I wasn't hungry, and my nose was running, but I was fine. We saved money by not eating much at first, and then we hung out with the smokers and ate all sorts of crap.

✦

When we had to come back to New York, it was late September 1973, just getting cool in the evenings. Nixon was dodging any questions about Watergate, guilty fuck that he was. The cab company hired me again, but they gave me a bullshit dawn-to-midafternoon shift. Eddie, after a short delay, returned to working nights at a bar. Our schedules were not in sync, but I could pop by to see him—we'd kid around about our glory days in Europe, and then he'd have to go make drinks for people. He was seeing a woman named Ginger, who showed up at the bar during one of my visits. She was pale and pretty, with reddish hair, and answered my questions with short answers. Yes, she and Eddie had met in this bar. Yes, she sort of worked, but her job was being a model at trade shows, which wasn't much of job. And no, she didn't live nearby (the bar was in a desolate strip near the eastern end of Bleecker Street).