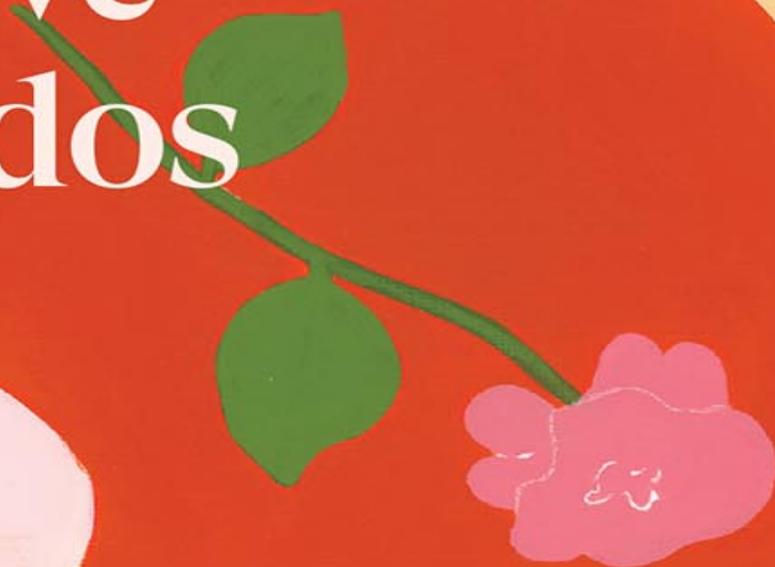


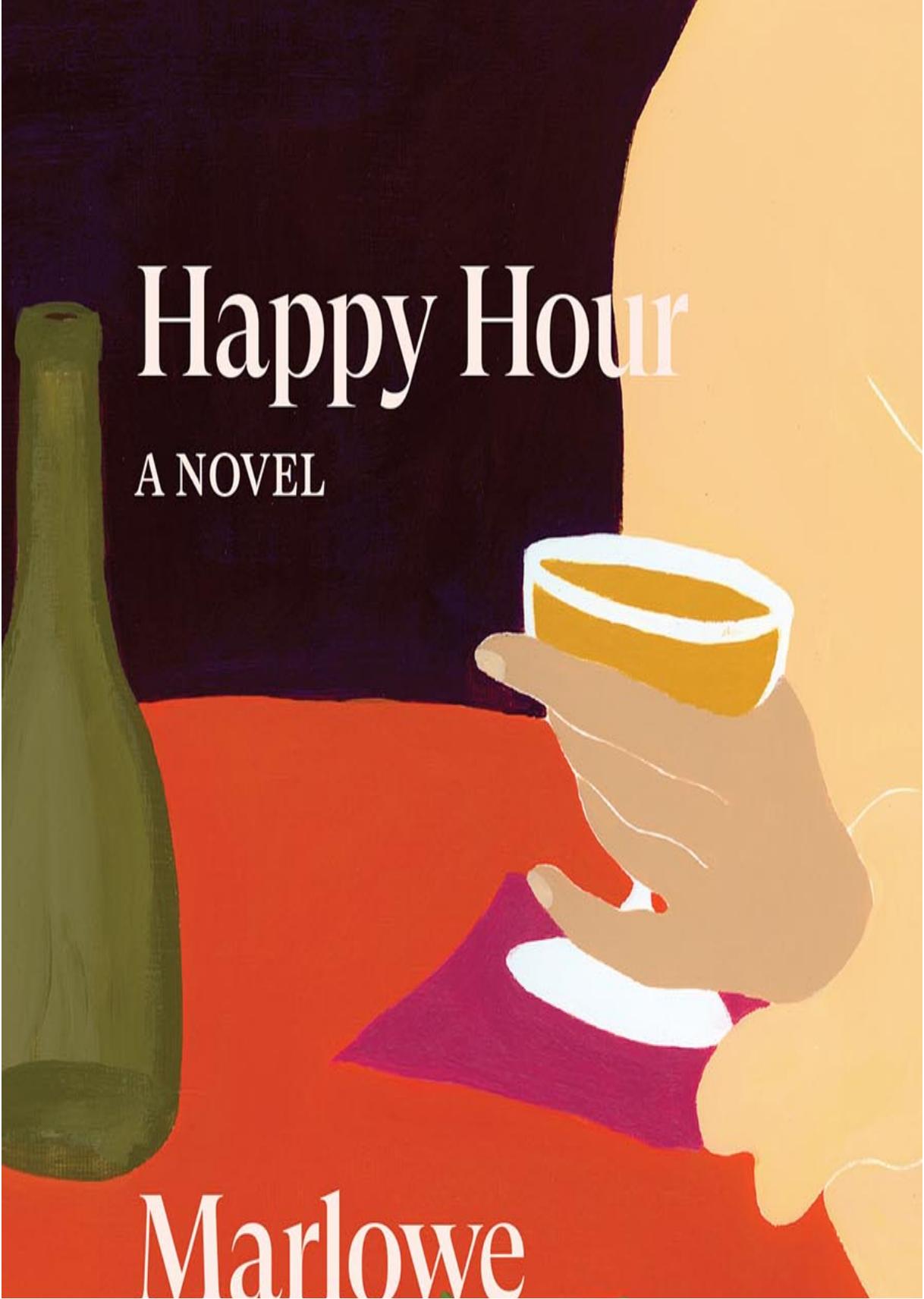
# Happy Hour

A NOVEL



Marlowe  
Granados





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A NOVEL

Marlowe

# Granados





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**V E R S O**

# Happy Hour

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# Happy Hour

Marlowe Granados



VERSO

London • New York

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This edition first published by Verso 2021  
First published in Canada by Flying Books 2020  
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

### **Verso**

UK: 6 Meard Street, London W1F 0EG  
US: 20 Jay Street, Suite 1010, Brooklyn, NY 11201  
[versobooks.com](http://versobooks.com)

Verso is the imprint of New Left Books

ISBN-13: 978-83976-401-1  
ISBN-13: 978-93976-403-5 (US EBK)  
ISBN-13: 978-93976-402-8 (UK EBK)

### **British Library Cataloguing in Publishing Data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Granados, Marlowe, 1991—author.

Title: Happy hour / Marlowe Granados.

Description: London; New York: Verso Books, 2021. | Summary: “It’s the summer of 2013, and while New York swelters Isa and Gala scrape and hustle to get by. Among a rotating cast of artists, academics, and bad-mannered gifters, they discover that desires aren’t for denying. But as money gets sparse and circumstances grow precarious, the pair struggle to convert social capital into something more tangible”—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021004039 (print) | LCCN 2021004040 (ebook) | ISBN 9781839764011 (paperback) | ISBN 9781839764035 (ebk)

Classification: LCC PR9199.4.G72457 H37 2021 (print) | LCC PR9199.4.G72457 (ebook) | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021004039>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021004040>

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

*For my mother and my Gala.*

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## Acknowledgements

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# May

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## May 17

My mother always told me that to be a girl one must be especially clever.

Before landing at JFK, I had three Bloody Marys and an extra piece of cake that fell apart in my mouth. A person should never take on a city with an empty stomach, and I am always hungry.

Leaving London didn't bother me much because one should always be making moves. When asked, "What made you come to London?" I would say, "I didn't want to go home." That, to me, is always enough.

People think coming to New York is an answer, and that's where they go wrong. It was Friday night and the sun had already set. At each subway stop, large groups of friends came on the train. Down the car, someone played a disco medley off a phone. I felt my own night stretch out before me.

By then, Gala had landed in Newark; it was only her second time on a plane, so I had asked Nicolas to pick her up from Penn Station. She did not trust her instincts to find Brooklyn. Nicolas is a prince for doing things for us when we have nothing but friendship to offer him. He's known Gala and me since we were young. It is so gentlemanly of him to take us under his wing. Nicolas answered his phone after a couple of rings and said, yes, he had eventually found Gala, and they'd been sitting on a stoop waiting for me to call.

Gala was thinner, newly blond, and coughed that same dry cough she's had since high school. Seeing her, I was reminded of all the times we sat in bars we were not legally allowed to be in, saying things like, "Of course I believe in Destiny." Nicolas was handsome like always, the kind of handsome everyone agrees on. He still swoops his dark hair back before speaking. He has the habit of creasing his forehead when he is listening to someone talk, which gives him a look of discernment. Nicolas and Gala gave me hugs and said things like, "Have you found yourself yet?" which is their idea of teasing. They said my accent was affected. Gala says I sound like I'm always running out of breath.

The station was a straight twelve blocks from our new house. The sidewalk on the way was littered with broken glass and plastic bags. It was dark already. Gala had brought a sizable suitcase. “We could probably live in it if we can’t pay rent,” she quipped. She thinks it’s funny to make jokes about doom. Nicolas said the neighbourhood is fine, but for girls there are certain pockets to avoid. And I said, “Like all neighbourhoods.” Nicolas is in advertising but has more sense than to believe in it. His work transferred him to New York, and he’s been here for six months. “It was about time,” he said. He had grown out of the city we came from and had seen all he wanted to see. Plus, he wanted to succeed as a bachelor, and there are simply more girls in New York.

A couple of boys who looked around our age were smoking on the front steps when we arrived. The house was a pinkish, clay-coloured brownstone with fat hearts engraved above the windows. Bikes were chained all along the railing, and two small lamps lit up the doorway. I was the first to go up the stairs with one of my bags, but none of the boys moved for me. I had to delicately manoeuvre around them saying, “Excuse me, sorry about that.” Gala, on the other hand, pushed right past, hitting their shins with the sides of her suitcase. “Can you get out of the way? We’re moving in.” One of them, who was wearing a Brooklyn Nets jersey, shrugged. “But what are you *doing* here?” You could tell they thought they’d earned a little clout by living in New York for one or two years. Some people acquire brutishness in the laziest way. I laughed and looked to Nicolas, who was at the bottom of the stairs. He raised his eyebrows. He never thinks it’s necessary to be curt. Gala did not like the Nets guy’s tone and said, “What the hell are you doing here? Do you even live here?”

Apparently our roommates forgot we were moving in that night and had decided to throw a party. Our downstairs neighbours too. A small Rubenesque girl stopped in the hallway and asked Nicolas if he was moving in. I piped up and said, “No, no, that’s us!” She looked a little disappointed and led us through the house for a tour. Her name is Alex. She gave us one cold “welcome” beer each and said, “Don’t get used to this. I don’t really like to share.” She gestured to the collection of items in the fridge marked with her name. She walked us through the party, as though the gathering itself were an impressive feat. I tried to keep an open mind about the crowd. Many of them looked like art-school graduates who had yet to nail down a personal style.

Maybe it was because we were weathered from travel or because of Nicolas's charismatic good looks, but people eyed us whenever we entered a room. They stared as though it was obvious we were strangers. Gala said she didn't mind, she didn't want to be part of this milieu anyway. Music was blasting loudly in the dimly lit basement, where at most twelve people were dancing. Everyone else was either out back smoking or crowding the hallways. I overheard a boy with shaggy blond hair saying, "The Gowanus Canal is so underutilized. I think people exaggerate how polluted it is. Like, you can probably swim in there."

Our apartment is on the top two floors of the house, while unit B is the ground floor and basement. As we made our way up and down the stairs, people's eyes still lingered on us. The walls of our room are dark teal, and there is a fireplace that is just for decoration. It smells like old dust that was once settled but now rises through the air with the heat. We have an adjoining bathroom that connects to the hallway. You have to push the door with some force to shut it at all, and even then, it manages to spring open. Nicolas looked at the small double bed. "You guys gonna be okay sleeping next to each other?" Gala put her arm around my neck. "Just like old times. Like sisters!" She was referring to the six months I lived in her bedroom when we were sixteen. She would call me her "boarder" at school. I rolled my eyes and got out from under her grasp. Nicolas gave me a look I interpreted to mean "You can always stay with me." I am ahead of Gala in Nicolas's heart. Even chosen families have favourites.

Alex left us to unpack, running downstairs to the party, where the music had grown louder. "She's kind of odd—not in a good way," Nicolas said, smoothing down his hair. We looked out our window to the backyard, which was full of people. Pieces of conversation bubbled up so that we could hear "I'm loving cassettes right now," "Making fun of crystals is so *easy*," "Don't talk to me like I don't know where Ridgewood stops and Glendale begins!" Alex said we should get to know our downstairs neighbours so they would give us access to what she called "a nice herb garden." I doubt the people at the party noticed any kind of vegetation.

The girl we rented the room from is called Maggie, and her jewellery box contains only rocks and shells. She is a friend of a friend of a friend. Isn't everybody? She has an apartment in Rockaway, where she is going to spend the summer surfing. We have never met, but every month I am supposed to leave an envelope with the rent money in the mailbox for her.

Gala looked through the closet and let out a sigh. “There’s nothing in here we’d even want to borrow.” Maggie owns quite a lot of faux-bohemian dresses that are long, flowing, and highly flammable. Her shoes were covered in dust, especially in the crevices.

I was beginning to feel tired from the flight. Flying west across the Atlantic is always more difficult than flying east. I lay across the bed, over the thin blankets, and tried to relax. It’s funny how quickly a place can become yours. It never takes much, at least for me.

Gala started to unpack her things. “Don’t you want to take stuff out of your bags? Everything’s gonna get wrinkled.” I kept my eyes closed. “It’s not like we’re going anywhere. I have time.” Luckily it’s summer. I was able to fit at least sixty thin articles of summer clothing in my suitcase. I am an expert at packing, but also at coming and going. Gala and I secured a vendor stall at a street market on the weekends, so most of what I brought could be considered “stock.” Naturally I was worried I’d be inspected at customs because, I guess, I am in fact an importer.

The door to our room not being the most secure, people from the party kept coming in. It became clear I would not be able to rest. Nicolas was getting increasingly concerned about the way guys were coming into our room while we were getting ready for bed. They would burst in saying, “Oh, we thought this was a bathroom,” and loiter in the doorway as though waiting for an invitation. Before he left us for the night, Nicolas said that at this rate we should charge some kind of voyeur fee. Really, he thinks we should get a lock. Directing people to the bathroom next door, Gala rolled her eyes. “We’re so unlucky. Of course we move into a house where not one of the boys who come through is even cute. They look like they’ve never seen the sun.” They seem to find hardship fascinating—dirty hair but suspiciously straight teeth. Because they begrudgingly accept allowance from their parents, they think they’re not upper-middle-class. There are, of course, slummers in every generation.

When I was initially organizing our renting situation, Maggie asked me whether I could pick up a certain type of British shampoo for our other roommate. “He will thank you endlessly.” I unpacked it and put it on the shelf in the bathroom. A boy my height and of a brown complexion similar to mine poked his head around the corner. “*You* must be the girl who brought my toiletries.” He introduced himself as Lucian (pronounced like

Freud) and said he was once a French-literature major but now investigates for the private sector. He asked me about my background because, he said, we could pass for siblings. When I told him, he said, “We’re what they call exotic! That’s good. We can stick together, have each other’s backs and all that. I can trust you. You know,” he leaned into me and whispered, “the girls who live here are nice and all, but I just do not trust white girls. You never can—that’s a security measure.” I had to laugh because I knew Gala was listening from the adjacent bedroom. I opened the door. Lucian crossed his arms and said if she was with me, she was fine. I told him, “Anyway, Gala is former Yugoslavian, so she’s familiar with suffering in ways that other white girls are not.”

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## May 20

You should always keep old friends happy because they know more about you than you'd like. On Saturday night Gala and I were enlisted to entertain some old acquaintances who were in town for a long weekend. They travelled here as a group of nine; I only know some of them—James, in particular, because Gala used to throw rocks at his bedroom window. They've rented a one bedroom. I'm not entirely familiar with New York realty, but that seems like insufficient space for nine grown men. I guess that's why they started putting stickers all over the city advertising their virtues. The stickers read:

SHORT-TERM BOYFRIENDS AVAILABLE.  
MAY 17–MAY 23, 2013.  
EXPERIENCED. HANDSOME.  
SEEKING LADIES FOR ROMANTIC RENDEZVOUS.  
MUST HOST EVENINGS.  
SERIOUS ENQUIRIES ONLY.

I'm not sure how successful these advertisements have been because the guys seem to be counting on our maternalism towards them. In some ways, they're far worse off than we are, since we haven't resorted to placing ads. But there is always a danger in counting on us, especially for feelings. After a couple of drinks, Gala has her own agenda.

The boys ushered us to the front of the line for a bar that was at capacity. This particular bar had their ideal clientele—girls raised on milk and television who, in the interest of having a weekend-long diversion, might take one of them in. I appealed to the bouncer to let Gala into the bar. He agreed but said there was no way the whole group could gain entry because the bar was “actually full.” Gala was inside for only about twenty minutes before the boys started to get impatient. James came up to me while I was chatting with the bouncer about New York's noise codes and said, “Hey, Isa, how about we leave, huh?” I can't tell you how much pressure is put on girls like me and Gala to give other people a good time.

I assured the boys that Gala would pull through, and soon enough a group of ten left. I don't know what exactly Gala said to them, but I feel like it was something along the lines of "There's a much better party across the street. You should come with me," or "You're the most interesting person here; you deserve better than this dive." Gala has a certain rough-and-tumble charm that can, in some situations, be advantageous. People will leave if they're convinced they're too good for something.

The later it got, the more Gala forgot about our initial plan. We were to pawn off the boys so we wouldn't have to be responsible for them anymore. From what I gather, while I was innocently waiting in line for the washroom, Gala spotted two of "our boys," in the throes of flirting with some girls she described as "timid and barefaced." She has never been kind to those she deems easy to talk to. Gala believes conversation should be brimming at argument. She says, "Anything less than difficult is a copout." Fully subscribed to this mantra, she decided the boys' flirting was an affront to our generosity as hosts, and she really worked herself into a frenzy. One of the boys, John-Henry, had been following me all night, buying me gin and tonics, feigning gratitude and admiration. I didn't care because usually if I have a drink in my hand, I'm at peace. But Gala believes I choose to suffer in silence, and she says that's why she's always fighting for my pride. In this case, she thought I'd be hurt by John-Henry's deception.

Apparently this was reason enough for her to whip a beer bottle at one of the Plain Janes. Can you imagine? It could've all been avoided if she had spoken to me about it first, but she finds details boring and irrelevant. It's hard to blame her. Loyalty has manifested itself as violence throughout history, and, honestly, I think she thought it would make me laugh. Had I been a first-hand witness, I would have. John-Henry did not find it so funny and went straight for Gala, chasing her out of the bar. No one was hurt; Gala is not known for her accuracy. Being a good friend, I went outside to monitor the situation. I asked for a cigarette from a bystander while Gala hid behind a couple of bicycles. John-Henry approached her, brandishing the offending bottle, and Gala stood with her hands up. "It was a joke! It was a joke!"

The bystander and I observed the scene quietly. He turned to me. "Aren't you going to save her?" I laughed. "Believe me, she's not waiting for *me* to jump in." Just as predicted, two boys, who interpreted the scene as a kind of domestic dispute, interrupted it. "Leave her alone, man. She's not

interested.” I’ll bet Gala is the only person alive who can get two strangers to blindly defend her when she is so clearly the delinquent. The bystander laughed to himself as Gala sat perched on a ledge praising her “heroes” while each one tried to get her to accompany him to a different party. The bystander could not see how two girls with such opposing demeanours could be close friends. I told him diversity is good business and develops one’s sense of taste. He said, “Maybe that’s true, but listen, I’m gonna head out in a sec.” I asked him where he lived, and he pointed down the street. “Hold on.” I called for Gala. She loves making a scene but knows the only way to recover from one is to abruptly take leave. As we walked with the bystander, she pulled on the cuff of my shirt and whispered, “Who’s he?”

The apartment was dim, red, and felt like a saloon. Gala suggested we get a bull’s skull like the one that hung above the sofa. The bystander’s name was Benjamin Elvis. He wore his hair slicked back and had a variety of tattoos, including “REGRETS?” across the knuckles of both hands, which Gala and I found especially entertaining. Tattoos are funny because if you have enough of them, people get the impression you are tough. I guess they show you can endure pain. Benjamin Elvis shared the apartment with a Russian man named Vlad, who would not be back till “much, much later,” as he was a man of late-night business. Benjamin Elvis put on some crooner music and filled three tumblers with whiskey, each with a single ice cube. I had to compliment him because I found this gesture elegant. I barely had a look at him when we were outside the bar, but now I found he was not unattractive. His eyes were a little close together, and he had a weak chin, but his overall effect was admirable.

Sitting on the couch was a chubby, grizzled dog named Pugsley. He was, in fact, a pug. The dog seemed overwhelmed by our company. He leapt off the sofa and, in his excitement, immediately made a mess on the floor. Benjamin Elvis was embarrassed and hurried to get wipes. Gala was largely sympathetic to Pugsley.

Benjamin Elvis had been working at a bar around the corner and was cut early. He had been hoping to take it easy tonight, but then we came along. I danced with Gala in the middle of the living room, while he counted his tips. We became a little overzealous, and when Gala tried to twirl and dip me, she let me fall to the floor. I can feel the bruise developing on my side.

Gala took the wad of cash Benjamin Elvis had been counting and threw it over me, letting it fall like confetti. A real spectacle. She thought it was the funniest thing in the world. Pugsley enjoyed it as well. After the moment passed, Gala apologized profusely and picked up each bill from the floor. Despite some of her behaviour, she hates mess, a real neat freak. She handed him the money and asked him if he could get us both jobs. “We were only joking about summer diets. We don’t really want to starve!” He asked whether either of us could make a whiskey sour or an old-fashioned. Gala said she could surely discern what was in them after having consumed so many. Benjamin Elvis was not convinced. I had to plead, “Wouldn’t you be so nice as to teach us?” He looked at me in a way that wasn’t exactly brotherly and said, “Maybe.”

Benjamin Elvis’s room had mirrored closet doors and a couple of guitars that looked like large violins, with the *f* carved into them. His bed was dressed in sheets that were a sunburnt-orange colour, which I thought was an interesting aesthetic choice. A fan emitted a low buzzing sound that made the street seem quiet. Benjamin Elvis slept in the middle, with me and Gala on either side of the bed. We would’ve gone home, but putting a cap on an evening of adventure can be tough. It takes practice to have restraint, and we are not yet at an age to try it out. Once Gala hit the pillow, she fell straight to sleep. I hate the anxiety of a latenight journey home, especially when the trains come so irregularly. Though it was night, it was still a little too warm. I turned my head to see if Benjamin Elvis was awake.

I woke up to the sound of someone coming home. A man opened the door and was shocked to see me there. Clearing his throat he said, “Uh, hello?” I sat up, realizing I was no longer in Benjamin Elvis’s room. I extended my hand to the man. “I’m sorry. You must be Vlad. I’m Isa Epley.” He seemed uncomfortable at first, I think because he had a bit of a scare when he saw me. I got out of the bed and sat on a chair at the desk. I explained that I must have sleepwalked into his room. (It is only natural for me, as an only child, to seek a bed for myself.) It was becoming light out, and I asked whether he always came home at this time. He opened his window and lit a cigarette. He had sort of a sad, weathered face and distinctly Russian tattoos. He told me he didn’t mind coming home at daybreak. “It reminds me of home, in summer, when it gets light earlier and earlier.”