

Part One: Square Peg

“‘What do you want to do?’

‘I want you to save me from—from it all,’ she replied.”

— Dashiell Hammett, *The Maltese Falcon*

L. Andrew Cooper

CHAPTER 1: MISADVENTURE AT THE ANKARA CAFÉ

A block away from the bustle of University Square, the two-story structure of the Ankara Café and Hookah Lounge sat between an independent bookstore and an old movie theatre, and Daniel Lowe sat on its second level, worrying, waiting for Chuck Adair to find him at his table. The first level offered only coffee and desserts, while the second added the hookahs. Finding no unoccupied tables downstairs, Daniel had come up, even though he disliked the air quality. The fragrance enchanted, and he didn't mind the taste when he inhaled, but his lungs objected to the burning tobacco, and he wondered how the Ankara got around whatever indoor smoking bans the state had in place. The smoke's whitish wisps, however, drifting and gathering, hovering and eddying, created, in conjunction with the multicolored and patterned fabrics draped from the ceiling and around windows, subtle and mesmerizing effects with the sunlight streaming from all directions. People, young people, occupied almost as many tables up here as they did below, and from their lips poured clouds that refracted reds and greens, blues and oranges, a sun-dappled, fabric-strained kaleidoscope that made Daniel feel disoriented yet somehow at home.

He coughed.

Daniel wore black slacks, a black turtleneck, and a relaxed black blazer. The blazer looked more formal, but the ensemble seemed no more funereal than many youngsters in the milieu of The University, where inkiness provided a badge for brooding intelligentsia. Though he was older than most of the students smoking the hookahs around him, his head of thick, dark-brown hair, cut short and parted to the side, suggested no more than two and a half decades. The hair and covered neck framed his face and increased its already pronounced whiteness, glowing skin clean-shaven and plastic-smooth, with lips a rose-red turned pale and eyes an ice blue behind round glasses, wiry, silver-rimmed. A long, narrow nose, *aquiline*, held up the glasses. Daniel didn't know whether the nose was attractive. He didn't know whether he was attractive. He stood negligibly shy of six feet tall, and he

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was thin without being skinny. Without his jacket, the close-fitting turtleneck would show his chest and arms at some advantage, and he had developed muscles in his legs, too, perhaps because he, like many of The University's perkier students, went running by the Ionic River, which bordered campus.

Daniel was not perky, and in his current circumstances he worried about being attractive.

A woman with long black hair, generous curves, and a golden-tan complexion, wearing an embroidered periwinkle dress that he assumed was somehow Turkish, carried a tray to Daniel's table and set down a small cup of coffee and a glass of water on the side. *She* was attractive. As his beverage's rich aroma infiltrated his questionable nose, Daniel tried and failed not to look into her alluring brown eyes while he said, "Thank you."

"You're expecting someone else?" Her accent was American. A local.

"Yes, I—" Daniel looked beyond the beautiful server, through the smoke, and saw the answer to the woman's question emerging from the stairway. Chuck wore jeans and a striped shirt and a heavy brown coat and was as white as Daniel, maybe whiter, as he had just come inside from the cold, sunny afternoon. Their eyes met. Chuck waved, and Daniel lifted an acknowledging hand. "That's him," he told the beautiful server.

"I'll come back around for his order." She left.

Chuck arrived at the table and took off his heavy coat while he said, "Hey. Sorry I'm a little late. Finally had to just blow off the study group."

Now that Chuck's coat was off, Daniel could see that the striped shirt was a polo. It showed off Chuck's physique to better advantage than Daniel's turtleneck. Daniel cleared his throat. "If now's a bad time—"

"Are you kidding?" Chuck hung his coat on the back of the chair across from Daniel and sat. "*They* were studying. I was practically tutoring. Keeping our appointment should pay a much higher dividend."

Appointment? Dividend? Chuck's diction came across as intentionally elusive, refusing to answer the question that had

lurked behind Daniel's observations about the café's and his own appearances: what was he doing here? Why had Chuck set up this... *appointment*? The question was a matter of concern.

"Remind me," Daniel said, "what, um...."

Chuck laughed. When he laughed, his lips parted. He had perfect teeth. He also had about two days of stubble, and the kaleidoscopic lighting effects did the same thing to his cheeks as they did to the light brown hair on his head, bringing out shimmering red highlights. Daniel supposed—no, concluded—that Chuck was attractive. The conclusion worried him. "What the fuck you're doing here?" Chuck asked, still grinning. "You were awfully nice to show up without knowing."

Daniel didn't know what to say. That he didn't have anything better to do?

"But I guess," Chuck continued, "you must have enjoyed our conversation, too. Like I said, I wanted to extend the Dinner Society discussion, on a more personal level, because you and I seemed to connect on certain things."

Which Dinner Society discussion? What kind of personal? What exactly did he mean by *connect*? "Chuck, you're, um, you know. Right? I mean, I think. Which isn't to say there's anything, you know. But I—I'm not, really, uh—do you think—did you think I—that's no good. Do you find me...?"

"Dan. Danny. Listen to me." Chuck leaned forward, then sat back. "Do people call you Dan or Danny, or is it always Daniel?"

"Daniel is fine, thanks." Daniel in the lions' den. Daniel beset by beastly appetites.

"Daniel, try speaking in complete sentences."

Daniel looked left. Daniel looked right. The smoke seemed to thicken. "Chuck," he said, and he realized he was going to ask. He leaned in and lowered his voice. "Chuck, do you find me attractive?"

Chuck leaned in and lowered his voice. "Do you find *me* attractive?"

"No!" Daniel got quieter. "Well, you are, but, I mean, I—I'm not—which is to say—"

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Lowering his voice as much as significant ambient noise would allow, Chuck said, “Are you trying to come out to me as a heterosexual?”

Daniel sighed and sat back, feeling rouge in his cheeks. “Yes! Yes, I am.”

“It’s okay. I thought as much. I fully accept you as a straight... attractive, yes... but straight man.” Chuck leaned back in his chair. His expression might have been a smirk.

Feeling tension drain from his shoulders, Daniel said, “Thank you. I was worried.” Intending to continue, he sipped his coffee. Its intensity and density made him lose his train of thought.

With a less spirited laugh, Chuck said, “Nothing to worry about. You’d be certain if I had asked you on a date. I asked you here because you seemed personally invested in the discussion of brain chemistry and relativism.”

Relief elated. Daniel took a deep breath and almost didn’t mind the smoke. If the sun could have been sunnier, it would have been. He looked around the room and wondered whether the fabric draping from the ceiling so close to bowls of flaming tobacco could be a fire hazard. *Brain chemistry and relativism*. “You mean mental states creating idiosyncratic realities that don’t exist in a hierarchical relationship to one another,” he said.

“Yeah, that,” Chuck said. “But I said more personal because I wanted to talk about... my brother.”

“Brother.” Daniel sipped his coffee. This time, he was prepared for its richness, and it did not throw him off his rhythm. “I don’t remember you saying anything about your brother.”

Chuck looked serious. “I didn’t, not directly. I did mention someone who tends to—well—you see—my brother has always been a little bit of a weird fish.”

Daniel imagined a woman who looked like Chuck, feminine curls with reddish highlights, giving birth to a fish. A *weird* fish, plaid scales and prehensile fins. “Older or younger?”

“Pardon me?”

“Your brother,” Daniel said. He looked around for the server in the periwinkle dress and didn’t see her. “Is he older or younger?”

“Older,” Chuck said. “Though one of his quirks is that he gets into these... I don’t know, phases... where he can act really child-like.”

“For example?”

“Last weekend, he pretended his pancakes were frisbees.”

“With or without syrup and butter?”

“Without.”

“That’s lucky.”

“I guess it is.”

Daniel nodded and sipped his coffee. Sometimes, silliness could be a necessity. And a dry pancake could be a lot like a frisbee. “That’s not what you were thinking about when you came here to propose a connection between your brother and our discussion of brain chemistry and relativism.”

“No, it isn’t.” Chuck’s eyes turned soft. “Compared to the others at the Dinner Society, you seemed more sympathetic to the idea of idiosyncratic truths, individual actualities, not beholden to a popular, supposedly empirical consensus about ‘the real.’”

Had he been *too* sympathetic? While certain types of cultural relativism had become acceptable to the mainstream long ago, other types—moral relativism and a certain strain of ontological relativism—had reached new peaks of dangerousness in everyday debates about who was empowered to kill whom and what did or did not qualify as “fact.” Daniel did not want Chuck or anyone to label him as an agent of chaos hammering at the foundation of a society too fragile for idiosyncrasies unchecked by the agreed-upon perceptions of the mass. He worried about his own idiosyncrasies. He worried about how discussing Chuck’s brother might turn the café’s many-colored lighting effects on him.

Chuck began, “Kyle is...”

So, the brother had a name. Kyle. Even with the name, Daniel couldn’t rule out the possibility that the brother was a ruse, a figure for discussing idiosyncrasies in a disembodied way, to see which ones would eventually roost within the overall construct of Daniel-ness.

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“Or at least people would say Kyle is sick,” Chuck finished. “A part of me prefers to imagine that he lives in his own world, a place no more or less valid than where I live. I like to think that.”

“What happens in Kyle’s world?”

Chuck smiled, weakly. “I can’t claim to understand very much. He has these wild flights—delusions, I guess most people would call them—that are sometimes very grand and inspiring and sometimes so fraught with paranoia that I know he must be miserable. He rambles about surveillance, about conspiracies that lead to some place of judgment. But even though he has trouble explaining the conspiracies of which he is alternately or simultaneously part and target, sometimes because doing so would put *me* in danger, everything he says he experiences seems real enough to me. He sees, hears, smells, tastes, touches. Who am I to question? Nobody requires my experiences to be peer-reviewed. Why should he face a different standard?”

“He shouldn’t,” Daniel said, *sotto voce*. He sensed all the judgment Chuck knew people pointed at Kyle. Daniel felt it pointed at himself.

“Shouldn’t.”

“I knew you would understand.”

Knew? *Knew*? How did Chuck know what Chuck *knew*?

“I have a stunning vocabulary,” Chuck said, “but there’s one fancy word I’d rather not know.”

Everyone at The University had a stunning vocabulary. It was the most prestigious institution of higher learning in the country, possibly the world. “Oh?”

“Anhedonia.”

The word felt familiar. “I don’t know it,” Daniel said.

“The inability to feel pleasure, enjoyment, fulfillment. It’s scarier than Kyle’s otherworldliness. The otherworldliness I can understand in glimpses. I can admire it. But when he just looks drained... despondent... cut off... and nothing makes the light come on in his eyes... oh, fuck me, did I really say that? Super-cliché! Light in the eyes. Shitting fucking Christmas.”

“I know what you mean,” Daniel said. The lightless feeling. Chuck could have been talking about him. Daniel hadn’t ruled out that Chuck was, in some roundabout way concealed for

reasons that some new reasoning would have to uncover, talking about him.

“Is the cost of idiosyncrasy, of having an existence truly independent relative to everyone else’s, the gradual draining of all affect?” Chuck was trying to look intellectually curious, but his face betrayed desperation. “And without affect, does anything of the self remain? Am I losing Kyle a bit at a time to a world that will eventually be barren? Separate is fine, if it gives him what he needs, but a wasteland?”

“It’s terrifying,” Daniel said. *I will show you fear in a handful of dust.*

“It is! I knew you would understand!” Chuck took a deep breath. The beautiful server walked by without stopping. Daniel thought the timing wrong for signaling her. “Do you think that’s it? Do you think the farther we get from a consensus reality, the more we lose ourselves?”

“I don’t know,” Daniel said. He hoped not. Self, or Daniel-ness, emerged, he must have heard, as the product of social interactions, an intersection of institutional, political, and other forces that manufactured positions for identities, so in being away from the social, a person might get cut off from self, and there might be no Daniel-ness in Daniel. He hoped he had Daniel-ness, but he couldn’t say why he hoped for it. He didn’t ponder the possibility of its absence and feel sad. He didn’t feel much of anything, perhaps a slight disappointment. Was that wrong? Should he be feeling more? Was he lost, like Kyle? Or again, figuratively, for Chuck’s discursive purposes, *was he Kyle?*

“I guess the person who’d know best would be Kyle,” Chuck said.

Daniel nodded slowly.

“There’s something that scares me more than the anhedonia.”

Daniel mouthed the word “what.” He didn’t have the voice for it.

“Kyle’s been having these blackouts. Lost time. The family’s sure he’s staying put, but as far as he knows, he could be going anywhere, doing anything.” Chuck sighed and scratched a stubbly cheek.

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Daniel sipped his coffee, more concerned than ever that he and Kyle were one and the same. Daniel had blackouts. Swaths of lost time. Come to think of it, he didn't recall how he got to the café today. He must have walked, but where had he walked from? What kind of day was he having before he sat down, nervously awaiting what he hoped hadn't been planned as a date?

Of course, if he had remembered the planning, he might have known it wasn't going to be a date.

Was Chuck testing him?

He couldn't help feeling that his masculinity—his sexuality—and his sanity, his selfhood—were somehow on the line. Chuck could be plenty masculine and still be gay. The polo shirt and stubble proved it. But did Chuck's desire... because whatever he said now, Daniel believed Chuck had initially left the possibility of this *appointment* being a date wide open... make Daniel an object? Was objectification emasculating?

The server in the periwinkle dress approached.

Had Daniel and Chuck said they were attracted to one another, or had each simply acknowledged that the other was attractive? And either way, what did that mean? Daniel didn't remember ever pondering the attractiveness of other men. Such ponderance might have consequences.

The beautiful server stopped beside Chuck. "Can I get you anything?"

Chuck smiled, blinked long eyelashes at her, and said, "Can you recommend a good tea to go with the baklava?"

"That's an amazing dress," Daniel said. He was strictly male, strictly masculine, and strictly heterosexual, as Chuck had already noted.

"Thanks," the server said without turning to Daniel. "We have a delicious black tea that goes great with the baklava. I can bring you some of both?"

All charm, Chuck said, "Yes, please."

More threatening than Chuck's charm was this question of blackouts. What were they? What did they mean?

The beautiful server walked away. Daniel noticed strange movements in his peripheral vision but couldn't pay attention to them now.

Controlling his nerves, Daniel said, “So tell me about these... blackouts.”

“From what Kyle says, they’re nothings, complete subtractions, anti-experiences. The record skips.”

The record skips? Daniel said, “I’m not sure I...”

“Our dad still collects music on vinyl. Vinyl record players skip sometimes, jumping over sections of music like they weren’t there. It’s an analog thing. One second, you’re hearing a moment at one point in time, and the next second you’re hearing a moment twenty, thirty minutes later, as if nothing in between existed.” Chuck drew an imaginary line on the table with his finger. His finger leapt over a space and then continued the line. “It must be very disorienting.”

It is! Daniel wanted to pour out his sympathy for this *Kyle*, if Kyle existed at all, but he didn’t dare. “Different from getting blackout drunk?”

“At least then you have some warning,” Chuck said, “a context. Kyle has these unpredictable gaps that he discovers in retrospect, when evidence indicates that time has passed without him knowing, as if the world—or worlds, maybe—moved on without him, without him even being at all.”

In his periphery, Daniel saw what he thought at first was smoke gathering, in eddies, eddies like before. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like the smoke in his lungs, the smoke in his eyes. He wanted to stand up and stomp his feet. *I don’t like it, I don’t like it, I don’t like it!* “A piece of the timeline is missing,” Daniel said, controlling the urge to stomp and scream, “and in its place is a tiny... black... dot. No width or height. No dimensionality at all. A dot, perceptible only because it stands for nothingness, which is inconceivable.” Daniel sipped his coffee and gazed into his cup. Dark sludge oozed along the bottom.

“Yes,” Chuck said. “Precisely. We call them ‘blackouts’ for lack of better descriptions, but dimensionless dots appearing in place of realized timelines... yes. I knew you understood. I knew you *connected*.”

Connect the dots! Daniel said, “I am connected,” *through blackouts*, “to... to...,” and his eyes met Chuck’s, “you?”

Perfect teeth again became visible as Chuck’s lips spread in a wide grin. “Maybe. We are familiar. It is a conceptual relation.”

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The movement in Daniel's periphery was *not* smoke. In a high corner of the ceiling, near draping red, ornately patterned fabric, color had bled from the fabric into the air. The red air swirled. *I don't like it!* Daniel kept focus on Chuck, which also made him nervous. "I am connected," Daniel said, straightening his shoulders, "to Kyle."

Chuck's eyes exchanged their soft look for a lack of expression. "Yes... and no."

The red air swirled faster, becoming a miniature cyclone, a whorl of color that spun and spun until it broke away from its place in the high corner and moved along the ceiling. In its wake—in the high corner—it left blackness. Part of the ceiling was gone, and in its place the whorl had left a partial approximation of nothing. Daniel looked from table to table around him, where hookah smokers went about the business of smoking hookah, either unaware of or uncaring about the red whorl.

He looked to the ceiling in another direction. Patterned green fabric had spawned a green whorl. By a nearby window, a swirl of orange gained speed. The circling colors, gradually moving from their starting positions and leaving black behind, quickened the circulation of smoke through the room, creating layers of movement. Nobody seemed to notice.

Using a low, confidential tone, Daniel asked, "Chuck, do you see—"

"You are connected," Chuck said. He sounded mechanical. His posture was rod-straight, at a small distance from and parallel to the back of his chair.

"Connected," Daniel said, trying to concentrate on their conversation instead of the multiplying color whorls, blue, purple, and yellow joining the red, green, and orange, moving along the ceiling like errant balloons, beginning to sink like lazily zigzagging feathers, leaving blackness in their wakes. "I am... am I..." *Blackout.*

The room's noise level dropped, which was eerie. The drop allowed Daniel's attention to move toward a group of three student-types sitting at a table nearby. The primary attention-puller, a blonde with her hair in a ponytail who held a cup of tea, loudly said that "the physics exam had kicked her sorry ass all up

and down the street.” The two young men with her seemed eager to lend their agreement and support. Their teacups sat on saucers in front of them. A hookah stood at the center of their table, but they weren’t using it now.

Drifting from the ceiling, a color whorl that made Daniel think “magenta” zigzagged toward the blonde.

“I am... am I...” Daniel said. How did he get here? What *was* here? Was this place really the Ankara Café and Hookah Lounge? Or had he ended up someplace decidedly different? Especially since he didn’t remember getting here, the possibility of here being somewhere else worried him.

Brain chemistry and relativism. *Otherworldliness*. “A part of me prefers to imagine,” Chuck had said, “that he lives in his own world, a place no more or less valid than where I live.” Now Chuck, all stiff posture and mechanical voice and expressionless (lightless) eyes, sat across from him, and all Daniel needed to do was ask—

The possibly magenta color whorl descended to the top of the blonde’s head. Spinning like a drill, it passed into her head and moved down into her body, making little circles, replacing her with black. It erased her. Her companions sipped their tea.

Daniel stood abruptly from his chair, knocking it over behind him. He stomped one foot. “I don’t like it!” he cried. He stomped again and threw his coffee cup across the room, where it disappeared into blackness recently left behind by an emerald-green whorl. “I DON’T LIKE IT!”

Nobody turned to look at him.

All Daniel needed to do was ask—

Daniel righted his chair and sat down, looking for a sign from Chuck, who gave none. “Chuck, am I... am I... am I...” Did he want the answer? “Chuck, am I your brother? Am I Kyle?” He meant to ask whether Kyle was a conversational device that allowed for a shielded discussion of Daniel’s idiosyncrasies, but as he uttered the question, he realized he might have been asking Chuck whether he was his actual flesh-and-blood brother. In an otherworld, the utterable seemed possible.

Color whorls had overrun the ceiling and made their ways down to people, tables, support beams holding up the fragmented roof. The entire building could collapse. Reality could implode.

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Chuck blinked.

Daniel looked around, close to panic. Soon there would be more blackness than café. Blackout. *Blackout, blackout, blackout!*

Without affect, Chuck said, “You got too close, too soon.”

“But I don’t understand!” In his own ears, Daniel’s voice sounded problematically whiny. “Too close to what? Too soon for what? I don’t understand! I don’t—CONNECT!”

“This is not the beginning,” Chuck said.

Behind him, the beautiful server appeared, carrying a tray. She walked toward their table, sidestepping patches of blackness that perforated the space around her. A creamy orange whorl zigzagged by her shoulder but took no piece of her.

“She calls to you,” Chuck said. “From the missing places, she calls to you.”

The server arrived at their table with her tray. Her? Did Chuck mean *her*? Was she somehow calling? She set tea and baklava in front of Chuck without a word. Another whorl moved down toward her and missed.

Daniel implored her. “Excuse me, uh, Miss, but do you know what’s going on—”

She exploded in a flurry of periwinkle whorls, which moved upward in an arc from where she had stood to where Chuck sat. The whorls covered Chuck, moving up and down, back and forth, *scrubbing*, until where Chuck had been there sat a cut-out, a black Chuck-shape that lost cohesion as the whorls spread.

The café was almost silent. A few people remained at tables, chatting as if nothing had happened, but everyone else had become a black blot, as had most of the furniture and building. Panic finally seized control. Daniel leapt from his seat and bolted for the stairway exit, dodging black spots and color whorls, jumping over gaps in the floor that led not to the lower level but into abyssal jet. He reached the stairs and barreled downward until the stairs stopped, along with the stairwell, ending in blackness. He returned to the second level and found it mostly gone. A red whorl slammed into his chest.

He felt nothing.

He ran forward and, without looking, stepped onto a black patch. He saw what he had done, waited for a falling sensation,

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and felt surprised. The blackness supported his weight. He tried it with his other foot, confirming he could stand on black. Walking, he continued into what was left of the café's second floor. Color whorls hit him—silver, beige, and pink—but didn't faze him. He passed through black like anything else. These new discoveries only agitated the worried sickness in his stomach. What? Why? How? Reason had vacated. He remained, and the Ankara Café was going, going...

Gone.

Daniel stood in an empty volume.

Blackout.