VINTAGE

THE MAYOR'S TONGUE

NATHANIEL RICH

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About the Book

The Mayor's Tongue is a bold, vertiginous debut novel that unfolds in two narratives, one following a young man and the other an old man. The young man is Eugene Brentani, a devotee of the reclusive author and adventurer Constance Eakins, who goes to Trieste to find the girl he loves, who has in turn gone there herself to find Eakins. The old man is Mr. Schmitz, whose wife is dying, and who longs to confide in his dear friend Rutherford. But Rutherford has disappeared, and his letters, postmarked from Italy, become more and more ominous as the weeks pass.

From a young writer of exceptional promise, this exhilarating novel is a meditation on the frustrations of love, the madness of mayors, the failings of language and the transformative powers of storytelling.

About the Author

Nathaniel Rich has published essays and criticism in *The New York Review of Books*, *Vanity Fair*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Los Angeles Times Book Review*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic* and *Slate*. He is an editor at *The Paris Review*.

THIS IS FOR MY MOTHER AND MY FATHER

The Mayor’s Tongue

Nathaniel Rich

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PROLOGUE

THE CIBAEÑO TONGUE

IT WAS JUNE when Eugene Brentani took the job at Aaronsen and Son Moving Company and subleased an apartment in Inwood from a man on his crew named Alvaro. Like many of the men who worked at Aaronsen and Son, Alvaro had recently emigrated from the Dominican Republic. Unlike the others, however, Alvaro was from the Cibao Valley, a small rural region in the northern part of the country. Separated from the rest of the island by the Cordillera Septentrional mountain range, the isolated farming communities of the Cibao Valley had developed their own dialect. This dialect, Cibaeño, was virtually incomprehensible to natives of the other Spanish-speaking countries in the Caribbean. Cubans thought that it sounded excessively affricative, like Catalan; Puerto Ricans found it soft and melodious, like Portuguese. Even the other Dominicans on the moving crew were baffled by Alvaro's speech. To Eugene, it sounded like Alvaro was speaking with a mouth full of porridge. Alvaro's attempts to learn English were, despite his most strenuous efforts, pitiful, but he was able to make himself understood in other ways. Since words failed him, he communicated through vivid intonation; forceful hand gestures; and dynamic facial expressions, made with contortions of his rubbery face, the muscles of which were flexible to an uncanny degree. An arched lip or a wiggled ear was a disquisition in itself, conveying meaning far more articulate than, say, one of

Eugene’s father’s monosyllabic lectures. After several weeks, it no longer mattered that Alvaro couldn’t speak a word of English. Eugene believed that he could understand him just fine.

Alvaro’s flexibility was not limited to his facial muscles. Like Eugene, he looked too small to be a mover—he was lithe, almost bony—but his suppleness compensated for the lack of bulk in his back and upper arms. During a furniture-moving job, his body would arch, twist, and buckle out double-jointed, engaging each muscle to its greatest capacity. He could support a loveseat on the straining tendons of his neck, an ottoman on his bulging rib cage, and even an armchair on his flexing toes, if he walked on his heels. He was blessed with a jigsaw anatomy.

Although Eugene often feared that his friend’s spine might rupture, or his fingers snap back in compound fractures, Alvaro never suffered any serious injuries. After an especially arduous job, however, his whole body, and not just his arms or his back, throbbed madly. Each vertebra, rib, and abdominal muscle, his pelvis, his quadriceps, his collarbone, and even his jaw rallied together, a ragged band of crippled assassins, raising hammers, gouges, and pliers to his frayed nerve endings. Using a wild array of gestures, Alvaro explained to Eugene how he spent entire nights limping between a bath filled with ice cubes and a bed insulated by a carefully choreographed patchwork of electric heating pads. He also mimed tears, for the sadness he felt about this sorry state of affairs. But he was good at the work, and he needed the salary. He had to feed his family.

When Alvaro showed his apartment to Eugene, he apologized for its meager furnishings. He had scavenged everything he owned from moving jobs. The front door opened into a long living room, occupied only by a broad player piano, an orange floor lamp, and stuffed into the space on the parquet floor behind the piano, a king-sized mattress. A rough kitchen nook had been built into one

corner, delineated by a wooden counter and two stools. Pipes jutted out from the crumbling white brick behind the stove. A doorway, minus door, led to the sole bedroom, which ran parallel to the living room and was almost as long. This, Eugene realized, would be his room. It contained a second mattress, a single; a crumpled sheet was balled up on the floor next to it. Blushing, Alvaro shook it open and laid it over the mattress.

“I can make my own bed,” said Eugene. “It’s really no problem.”

The sheet was spotted with discolorations like diseased flowers; Alvaro smoothed it apologetically. Eugene was about to repeat himself, to make certain his friend understood, when Alvaro let out a loud, embarrassed chortle. Eugene took that to mean that they had reached an accord.

As it turned out, Alvaro was rarely in the apartment. That was because he had another home down in Washington Heights, which he shared with his wife and their two young sons. He was there for most of the connubial hours—breakfast, supper, and bedtime—but would visit the Inwood apartment on off-shifts during the day and on the weekend. He usually brought with him a nurse, a secretary, or sometimes a physician’s aide—women from St. Valentino, the hospital that regularly employed Aaronsen and Son to move machinery. On Sunday nights, he brought home prostitutes. Eugene had never seen one before, at least not up close, not within his own living space. They were less exotic at close range, in the apartment’s murky orange light. They dressed cheaply, but not as ornately as he might have guessed (though perhaps that was a reflection of Alvaro’s tastes). They looked a lot like the secretaries.

Eugene usually knew when to expect Alvaro, so he was able to avoid any real unpleasantness. Even though there was no door to his room, and the walls were dangerously thin, the king-sized mattress was on the opposite side of the

living room, so the sounds never rose beyond muffled grunts and creaks. If Eugene put on his headphones, it was only to block out any of the noises the girl might, accidentally, let escape. Eugene didn't actually mind listening—in particularly lonely moments he sometimes removed his headphones—but for the most part his modesty, and his respect for Alvaro, kept him from spying on his friend.

At least until one bright, full-mooned night, several months into Eugene's stay. Alvaro had brought home Betty, a Filipina nurse whom Eugene knew from St. Valentino. During a night shift in October, while Eugene and Alvaro's crew had been hauling in three new CT-scan machines, she had brought Eugene a paper cup full of instant hot chocolate. When the other movers protested, Betty told them to shut up. Then she cupped Eugene's face in her soft, latexed hands, and winked at him. Though the men had catcalled and cackled, Eugene was elated. Part of the goal of this period of self-imposed exile was to meet a girl, and this was the closest he had come yet. But he had barely seen Betty since then. His habitual timidity prevented him from going out of his way to seek her out, and soon she seemed less desirable to him. In recent weeks, the other guys on his moving team told him that she'd been hanging out in the hospital stairwells with Alvaro off-shift.

They arrived late that night, whispering and giggling. Eugene stepped quietly to his doorway just as the couple fell to the mattress. He could see only the edge of an indeterminate body part—a back, or a shoulder, or maybe knees—protruding just slightly over the top of the piano, but the slanting moonlight projected a vivid silhouette onto the wall. It was horrible. It looked like a shadow-puppet show of a chrysalis tearing through its cocoon, its wings trembling and straining to separate from its body. Eugene soon realized that he was watching Alvaro, bound up in some kind of inhuman contortion. Betty's round, fleshy body was

on the bottom, this was clear; she lay on her back, her hips raised slightly off the mattress. Alvaro, taut and spindly, was on top, face-to-face with Betty; but he had arched his spine so dramatically that, with his knees fully bent, the tips of his toes rested on the back of his head. He had curved himself backward into a loop. His forearms, planted on the mattress on either side of Betty's head, bore his entire weight. Betty's hips rose to accommodate him. The chrysalis quivered, almost lost balance, and tightened once again. It looked painful. It looked like meditation. Betty started screaming—in ecstasy or terror, it wasn't clear. Eugene tiptoed quickly back to his room. Sliding into his bed, he found the sheets still warm with his own body heat. He shivered, and laughed with relief. Living in this apartment, working in this job, he really believed he was free.

Inwood was a foreign city, as far away from Manhattan as Eugene could travel—without actually leaving Manhattan. The neighborhood's geography was exotic, his friends were Dominican, and the meals Alvaro taught him to prepare induced dyspepsia in ways his childhood maid's traditional Italian cooking had never prepared him for. He saw no one he had known before moving there. His oldest friends knew where he was and what he was doing, but none of them lived in New York anymore, and he did not respond to e-mails from those few college acquaintances that had settled in lower Manhattan or in the subway-proximate neighborhoods of Brooklyn. In his more expansive moments, he fashioned himself a refugee, or at least some sort of psychic immigrant.

Eugene telephoned his father several times over the course of the summer, collect, from phone booths in Inwood. He could tell that his father was happy to hear a familiar voice, but neither one of them knew what to say. When he came home after college graduation, Eugene had told his father that he was moving to Florida, so in their

conversations he made sure to mention his job as a lifeguard, his house near the beach, and the afternoon thunderstorms that would come and go without warning. He added that he had made some nice friends, though he said they were Cuban, not Dominican. His father would chuckle or make curt remarks, but reveal nothing about himself. He was alone in Eugene's childhood apartment on Sutton Place, enduring the first years of his early retirement in solitary, nostalgic reveries for the old world.

Unmoored and exuberant, Eugene made an effort to lose himself to the cadences of his new life. He purposefully worked erratic shifts at Aaronsen and Son, so that his life lacked any semblance of routine. In his spare time, he sat and read by the pond in Inwood Hill Park, or visited his friends on the moving crew, meeting their families and playing with their children. He bought Spanish instruction tapes and tried to practice speaking the language around the neighborhood—at the grocery store, in the library, and at bars with skeptical Dominican women—but found he was best understood when he spoke Italian.

One night, after Alvaro and Eugene had lived together for more than six months, Alvaro invited Eugene to visit his other apartment. Alvaro's two sons called him Tío Eugenio and showed him how they could carry chairs and tables over their heads. Alvaro's wife, Milagros, was strong and squat, with gentle facial features and shapely, carefully painted lips. She cooked pork neck in salsa verde and never made eye contact, though she often smiled in Eugene's general direction. For the occasion Milagros had laid out a white cotton tablecloth, and the boys' hair had been washed and combed. When Pepecito used his fingers to push corn niblets onto his fork, Milagros reprimanded him in a hushed voice. Otherwise, she was silent. Eugene figured she didn't speak English. She was from Santo Domingo, and did not know Cibaeño either, so Alvaro had to talk to her, like all the women in his life, in a deformed, pidgin Spanish.

After dinner, while Alvaro put the kids to bed, Milagros served Eugene a cup of sweet, highly concentrated coffee. When she sat down to join him at the table, her smile vanished. She surprised him by speaking, for the first time, in English.

“Uncle Eugene,” she said, “I know about Alvaro’s nurses. I have been to the hospital. They took my children out of my body and I let them. They have given my children private consultations. I let them.”

“I’m sorry,” said Eugene, trying to sip his coffee. “I’m sorry.”

“I know that when he goes to sleep at your place, there are women present. I know that you allow this.”

“I’m so sorry,” said Eugene, his coffee cup gibbering on its saucer.

“I know you are not from here, but you are trying to live in this community. I know what Alvaro is capable of. I know what he can do with the shape of his body.”

“No, please, God no, I’m sorry, it won’t happen—”

“I want you just to know this: I forgive you. I forgive you.” She smiled again. A red glow seemed to rush into all her features, coloring her cheeks, her ears, her nostrils, radiating out of her eyes.

“Thank you. Thank you,” said Eugene, coffee splattering on his chin and neck. “Thank you—”

“Leave my house now,” she said. “Don’t return. My children will never look on you again.”

Eugene stumbled out, but later that night, he was not surprised to hear Alvaro creep into their Inwood apartment. When Eugene peeked out of his room, he saw a shadow on the wall that resembled a cow giving birth—the trembling skull of a newborn calf, distending an elastic caul. Eugene was too tired to perform the necessary extrapolations. As he tried to fall asleep, he heard the shifting weight of the player piano, and the inadvertent tinkling of the keys.

By March, Inwood—once a vibrant pastiche of florid bodegas, clapboard religious centers, and exotic family-style cafés—had all the muted familiarity of a childhood closet, brimming with items discarded and worn from use. Eugene turned corners without looking for street names; he crossed avenues without checking both ways for traffic, relying only on his hearing and peripheral vision. The public library, housed in a blocky mansion built in the Dutch colonial era, now seemed the only logical architectural bridge between its neighbors on Broadway, the Doppiando pizza parlor and the El Encantar del Principe Hair Salon for Men. Even the shadowy forms of Alvaro and his women projected on the orange-lit wall of the living room seemed as innocent as the most rudimentary of shadow puppets. Instead of a bloody chrysalis or a birthing cow, he saw doves and panda bears.

Alvaro started spending a lot of time at the library, and one night Eugene decided to accompany him there. He followed Alvaro to the third floor, and then into the men's bathroom; through what appeared to be the middle stall was a hidden passageway that led into a private study. A long conference table filled most of the room's floor space, though an ancient bookcase and small stained-glass windows were reminders of a time when the mansion served as a summer retreat for a family of wealthy Dutch merchants on the Hudson River. Soon the two friends were sneaking in several nights a week, shortly before the library's closing time, and would stay there undetected, late into the night. When Eugene asked how he knew about this room, Alvaro pointed to the conference table and then to his sore back, and Eugene understood.

They sat at opposite sides of the false-wood table. Eugene spent his time there trying to get through the eccentric late-career short stories of Constance Eakins, whom he'd studied in college—his thesis had been titled "Eakins: The Man, the Myth, the Monster." (He got a B—the professor complained that Eugene had gone out of his depth in trying to take on

the entire career of a writer so prolific.) Alvaro didn't read at all, but wrote obsessively on a yellow legal pad with a long blue pen, scrawling a chaotic, looping Cibaeño across the page.

One night, Alvaro started to read his writing aloud. Eugene couldn't understand a single word, but he loved the sound of Alvaro's voice, and lost all interest in the book he was reading—Eakins's *Keftir the Blind and Other Stories.* He played back the music of Alvaro's prose in his head, and started to suspect that his friend was a beautiful writer.

Alvaro looked up at Eugene, and spoke in his Cibaeño dialect.

"So? Did you like it?"

Eugene still couldn't understand a word his friend was saying, but he figured he could usually grasp the general idea. "That was nice, what you read," he said.

Alvaro nodded and brought over his writing pad. Eugene had not realized how much work he had done. Dozens of pages were filled with Alvaro's loopy, hieroglyphic scribbles. It was difficult to determine where words ended and began, since they were all cramped together, with little or no punctuation except for stray accent marks.

"Do you think you might be willing to translate it?"

Eugene squinted, trying to divine the meaning of his friend's words.

"It looks like you've worked very hard on that. You should be proud."

Alvaro frowned.

"But do you think you might be willing to translate it?"

"I do like the way it sounds. Like some enchanting Mexican song."

The two men stared at each other baffled. Eugene had never seen his friend this stubborn. Alvaro sullenly walked back to his side of the room and let his manuscript fall to the table. Although they were laughing again by the time they left the library, Eugene felt responsible for their mutual

incomprehension. Alvaro wanted to ask him something urgent, but Eugene couldn't figure out what.

The next night at the library, Alvaro couldn't concentrate on his manuscript. He strolled past the bookshelves, pretending to read the titles, and then ripped from his legal pad a fresh piece of paper. He wrote deliberately in a large, stiff hand, referring often to his old draft. Eugene watched as wrinkles formed on Alvaro's face in places he had never seen them. A culvert indented the patch of skin under his nostrils, faint gullies coursed along his jaws, and a network of trenches disfigured his forehead. Still frustrated by their miscommunication a day earlier, Eugene pretended not to notice.

Alvaro walked the length of the table and slid the yellow lined paper over the book that Eugene was pretending to read. When Eugene looked up, Alvaro was smiling, eager. The script was neatly written, but no more comprehensible for it. Alvaro pointed to the manuscript, and then to Eugene. He continued to repeat this gesture while he spoke.

"I would like you to translate it. Do you understand me?"

"Is this a story?"

"Please understand what I am saying to you, Eugene."

"Do you want me to . . . translate it?"

"Translate it," said Alvaro, nodding. His eyes flashed black.

"But Alvaro, I can't speak Spanish, let alone Cibaeño."

Alvaro took the Eakins book out of Eugene's hands. He slammed it shut and, with a dramatic flourish, threw it against the wall.

"Translate it. Please, Eugene, please translate it into English. Otherwise, it will be lost forever. Almost no one here understands my dialect, but I think you can."

Eugene began to read the dense scrawl, wondering what kind of story Alvaro would write. He pulled out his own notebook and laid it side-by-side with Alvaro's. Then Eugene began to write himself, stopping every sentence or so to consult Alvaro's text. Alvaro watched all this closely,

encouraging his friend whenever he looked up. The further Eugene went along, the less convinced he became that he was getting it right. But Alvaro looked on with such a hopeful expression that Eugene started to believe.

The story that began to take form on those pages seemed to be at least partially autobiographical in nature. The narrator was an immigrant from Jamao, a village in the Cibao Valley of the Dominican Republic. Like Alvaro, the man, who Eugene determined was named Jacinto, spoke in the Cibaeño dialect. Jacinto had moved to an apartment in northern Manhattan with another man, who was a depressed, fatherless loner. Jacinto was very poor, so he took a job as a moving man. This was unfortunate, because he had been one of the more prominent young men in Jamao, a member of the priest caste and the village's only surgeon. He delivered babies and issued last rites, performed exorcisms and blood transfusions. He taught children the Bible and cleaned their scraped knees with an astringent he distilled from a black mountain berry that he himself had discovered.

But Jacinto had been unhappy in Jamao, and craved a larger existence. He dreamt of a vast metallic metropolis, with spires rising from cathedral-like structures made of steel. He imagined hundreds of people tripping over one another, and tunnels that formed a secret network under the city like the caves dug out by moles, except these tunnels extended not only deep below the earth but also straight up, to the top of the highest buildings. Jacinto boarded a boat to Santo Domingo and then a flight for New York City. Once he arrived at the apartment, several rote secondary characters were granted introductions: a wicked old landlady, a boisterous, incoherent drunk, and an infant who might or might not be the Son of Man. They all lived together in a large high-rise in Inwood.

The real action begins when Jacinto meets Alsa. She's the teenage daughter of a downstairs neighbor, who is also

from Cibao. Alsa is beautiful and plump, with straight black hair that hangs below her waist. When she smiles, which is often, she has a habit of covering her mouth, until she gives way to laughter and breaks out in loud, irrepressible bursts. Eugene hoped very much that Alsa would fall in love with Jacinto.

Eugene completed translating this opening section of the story several weeks later, on an unseasonably mild night in April, relying heavily on guesswork, intuition, and the fragments of knowledge he was able to gather about his friend. When he was done, he read it aloud to Alvaro, who, despite his incomprehension of the English words, listened with an ecstatic expression on his face. Alvaro kept interrupting in order to shake his hand. Eugene began to suspect that his translation might have been accurate after all.

He was amazed. It was a rare and mysterious thing when two people could understand each other with such perfect clarity.

PART I

NEW YORK CITY

1

RUTHERFORD AND MR. Schmitz sit smoking on a public bench at the northern edge of Central Park, trying not to exhale into each other's face.

"Rutherford," says Mr. Schmitz, "I've started writing down the story of my life."

"The story of your—"

"The ENTIRE story of my life."

"I don't remember you ever writing down so much as a grocery list. Even your checks are signed by Mrs. Schmitz."

"I'm already in the middle of writing the first chapter, the story of my birth. After this, I will chronicle my childhood, my young adulthood, my advanced adulthood, and finally, my maturing years. I'm telling you this in absolute confidence. Lock and key."

Rutherford accidentally coughs a cloud of smoke into his friend's face.

"You're writing about your own birth? What could you possibly have to say about it?"

"I have a vivid memory of my own birth." Mr. Schmitz exhales slowly and rests his chin against his great boulder of a chest. "I even remember what happened before I came out."

Rutherford flicks his cigarette against the back of the green wooden bench, and waits.

"There were milky red-and-black clouds swirled up all around me, and I was suspended in a substance that had the consistency of fruit preserves."

Rutherford frowns, watching as Mr. Schmitz's eyes converge slightly.

“Under the strongest lock and key. Listen to my story.”

“I’m listening.”

“When I came out, I entered a state of mild shock. I couldn’t even cry. I felt only that I was being pushed on from all sides, like I was caving in. When the doctor slapped me, the pressure burst. I was never the same afterward. I was a new person.” He scratches his cheek. “This is all included in the first chapter.”

Rutherford regards his friend’s profile. Mr. Schmitz wears an undersized yellow checked jacket over a collared T-shirt and a bright speckled tie. An oily stain in the shape of Michigan peeks out from beneath his belly whenever he sits up straight, which is often. He has flat, happy eyes and is fond of rubbing his chin. He has combed his sandy hair loosely to one side, with an air of studied tidiness that is disrupted only by a single recalcitrant tuft that ribbons up behind one ear. His rigid sedentary pose was acquired over a half-century earlier at the Menno Simons Schoolhouse of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where he took a course every morning called Rectitude; the robust nuns lashed the students’ curved backs with aluminum metric rulers.

Sitting in this fashion Mr. Schmitz towers over his friend, despite being several inches shorter in height. Perhaps it is because of the disjunction of sight lines that Mr. Schmitz does not notice his friend’s scrutiny. Rutherford has the attitude of a man who stares hard at his own reflection in a sparkling lake in order to make out what lurks in the water beneath. Mr. Schmitz sits oblivious and still, except for his wayward tuft of hair, which jogs in the steady uptown breeze.

“I once kept a diary,” says Rutherford. “But I never read it over. I didn’t want to remind myself of all those days when nothing happened—the long passages of time between memorable events. Days like that make up most of our lives. We miss those days only if we keep track of them.”

“I think I know exactly what you mean,” says Mr. Schmitz. He lets his smoldering butt fall gently to the ground. After coughing several times into his armpit, he spits out a hunk of matter that resembles loose egg whites.

“Recently I’ve been having this dream, every night,” continues Mr. Schmitz. “Though I forget it as soon as I wake. I haven’t remembered a dream for over three months. I’m certain that I’m dreaming—I always was an active dreamer. But now, whatever dream I’m having, it vanishes the very second the sports radio comes on. That’s at five-fifteen a.m.”

“I sometimes have that dream,” says Rutherford. He is transfixed by the loose egg white matter and does not quite follow his friend’s words.

“I wake up to nothing—no memories of dreams. It’s like I stopped existing for the night,” says Mr. Schmitz. “I’m calm at first, but seconds later, I start to panic. I pull on my hair sometimes and once in a while”—he leans over to Rutherford, whispering hoarsely—“I turn the radio up so loud that my ears start vibrating. This usually wakes up Agnes, even when her hearing aids aren’t in. And when she wakes up, she starts screaming.”

“Mrs. Schmitz can, at times, be easily disturbed,” says Rutherford, frowning again, and straightening his cuffs. He wears cuff-links, even on a Saturday morning like this one, at the beginning of spring.

“I have a theory about what happens in these lost dreams,” says Mr. Schmitz. “I think they take place in a foreign land. A land that appears different to everyone who visits it.”

“I think I know this place,” says Rutherford, suddenly alert. His arm flies up; his forefinger jabs at a gray cloud above. “The strangest things happen there.” Rutherford removes his hat, a black bowler, for a moment, before resting it back down on his matted hair.

Mr. Schmitz watches him closely, his eyes asquint. He speaks in a whisper: “You know what land I’m thinking of, then?”

“Of course I do,” replies Rutherford, his voice lilting like a musical saw. “We spent the best days of our lives there, oh, fifty years ago.”

“Yes. Tell me about it. Maybe it will help me remember my dreams.”

The two men pause for a moment, taking in a deep, cold breath of air. They light new cigarettes, adjust various articles of clothing (a dirty collared shirt; a black bowler), and make brief surveys of the park in front of them. Finally, after exhaling the first mouthfuls of smoke over their outside shoulders, the two old friends turn again to face each other.

2

ONE MORNING IN May, nearly a year after Eugene had begun working at Aaronsen and Son, he was assigned, with Alvaro, a job on a shady block between Park and Madison on the Upper East Side. Their moving van rumbled to a stop in front of a three-story redbrick Georgian townhouse. Alvaro, who seemed never to have ventured south of Harlem, removed a crumpled red polo shirt from the floor under his seat, and stretched it over his wifebeater. Eugene was wearing a heavy winter hat, his company's sports jacket, and Alvaro's gold-rimmed aviator glasses.

He realized it was irrational, but Eugene hadn't been this close to his childhood apartment all year and he was terrified of running into his father. He had no idea what he would say to him—that he was back from Florida on vacation?

Alvaro seemed to sense his anxiety. He stared at Eugene for a moment and then broke into a wide grin, his dimples popping craters in his cheeks. He wrapped his arm around Eugene's shoulder and led him to the house. The front door stood ajar, so they peeked inside and announced themselves.

"Hello?" boomed a man's voice. "HELLO? God damn it, who's down there?"

Alvaro and Eugene raced up the stairs and into a hall decorated with large oil canvases of British hunting scenes that depicted eager spaniels prancing gamely around fallen elk and wild boars. The old man was in a room at the end of the hall, dark except for a single lightbulb that hung on a wire from the ceiling; it had all the charm of an interrogation

chamber. Several moments passed before Eugene's eyes could make anything out in the dim light. Crowded blackwood bookshelves began to take shape before him. They lined every wall of the room from floor to ceiling, and the rows of books were interrupted here and there by gold-framed photographs. An elderly man with a large head and wide, sunken shoulders sat upright in the middle of the room on a stool. His arms lay dead across his knees so he looked like a man waiting for a dog to return with his throwing stick. He wore a crisp, finely tailored suit and had chalky white hair that gleamed under the hanging lightbulb, which swung back and forth ever so slightly in the room's stuffy air.

The man appeared not to have heard Eugene and Alvaro's footsteps, for instead of acknowledging their presence he made an unpleasant retching sound, hung his head back, and opened his mouth, yawning like a lion. Two rows of bright white teeth sprang up to his lips, with such force that it looked as if they would leap out of his mouth altogether. The man convulsed, and the teeth popped back into his jaw. With a deep sense of relief, Eugene realized they were dentures.

"Hello, sir," he said, stepping forward.

"Yes? Ah, there you are," said the man, suddenly amiable, though on another face, his smile would have seemed a grimace. "Excuse the light. You see, we have this curious situation with our BOOKS." He hit his palms against his knees whenever he stressed a word. "They simply cannot abide the light. And so we're stuck here," he said, beginning to chuckle softly to himself, "in the DARK!"

"Are you Mr. Chisholm?" said Eugene. Alvaro appeared distracted, and was drifting off to one side.

"What's that? Oh yes. I'm Chisholm. ABRAHAM Chisholm," he said, slapping his knee. "Well what brings you here today? How can I HELP you?"

“We’re from Aaronsen and Son—we had an order to move some furniture from this house to an office uptown?”

“What is it? I can’t see so well. What are you looking at? Ah. Yes, there’s Connie.” Chisholm had followed Alvaro’s gaze to a bronze bust that stood on a pedestal in front of one of the bookshelves. “Good old Connie.”

Eugene walked over to the bust. It had been modeled after a young man, robustly proportioned; his caved eyes and pear-shaped cheeks gave him the rugged look of a prizefighter.

“Why don’t you take a look around,” said Chisholm. He raised his palm high above his knee, ominously, in preparation for an extra large smack. “I don’t mind. AT ALL!”

Eugene nodded and, with a glance to Alvaro, he began to survey the thousands of books that had been packed into the cramped space. The first title that he was able to make out was a familiar one: Eakins’s *The Darkness and the Devil.* As he went to take it down he noticed that it was one of over a dozen copies of that novel on the same shelf. Each of them was laminated and marked by a sticker on which was printed the edition’s publishing company, printing, and date.

“The Darkness!” shouted Chisholm from his chair, his voice filled with delight. “What wisdom, what daring! What ecstatic madness.”

“You like Eakins, Mr. Chisholm?”

“Like? Like? Why, LOOK,” said Chisholm, with a triumphant slap. He swept his arm around wildly to indicate the entire room. Eugene, his eyes finally adjusted to the light, realized that every shelf was filled with books by Constance Eakins. Chisholm hadn’t only collected the novels, essay collections, poetry collections, plays, and memoirs, but he also had anthologies, books of photographs taken by Eakins and books of photographs taken of Eakins, artworks inspired by his writing, scholarly studies, histories in which he was mentioned, and old literary magazines containing his short stories. A whole shelf was devoted to the Jaymes Silk