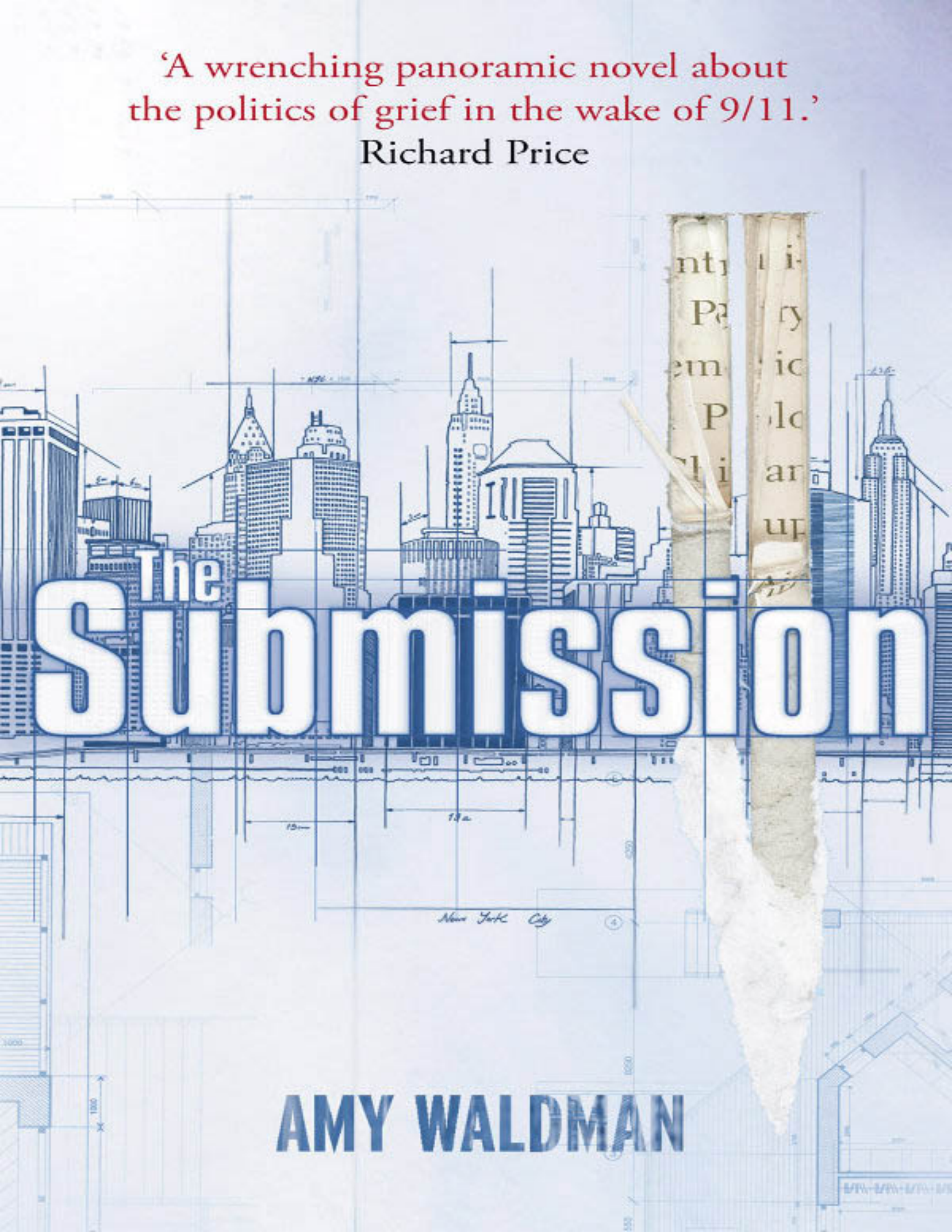


'A wrenching panoramic novel about
the politics of grief in the wake of 9/11.'

Richard Price



The Submission

AMY WALDMAN

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About the Book

Ten years after 9/11, a dazzling, kaleidoscopic novel reimagines its aftermath.

A jury gathers in Manhattan to select a memorial for the victims of a devastating terrorist attack. Their fraught deliberations complete, the jurors open the envelope containing the anonymous winner's name—and discover he is an American Muslim. Instantly they are cast into roiling debate about the claims of grief, the ambiguities of art, and the meaning of Islam. Their conflicted response is only a preamble to the country's.

The memorial's designer is an enigmatic, ambitious architect named Mohammad Khan. His fiercest defender on the jury is its sole widow, the self-possessed and mediagenic Claire Burwell. But when the news of his selection leaks to the press, she finds herself under pressure from outraged family members and in collision with hungry journalists, wary activists, opportunistic politicians, fellow jurors, and Khan himself—as unknowable as he is gifted. In the fight for both advantage and their ideals, all will bring the emotional weight of their own histories to bear on the urgent question of how to remember, and understand, a national tragedy.

In this deeply humane novel, the breadth of Amy Waldman's cast of characters is matched by her startling ability to conjure their perspectives. A striking portrait of a fractured city striving to make itself whole, *The Submission*

is a piercing and resonant novel by an important new talent.

About the Author

Amy Waldman was co-chief of the South Asia bureau of *The New York Times* and a national correspondent for *The Atlantic*. Her fiction has appeared in *The Atlantic* and the *Boston Review* and is anthologized in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading 2010*. She lives in Brooklyn.

For sources of information and inspiration for *The Submission*, please see www.thesubmissionnovel.com.

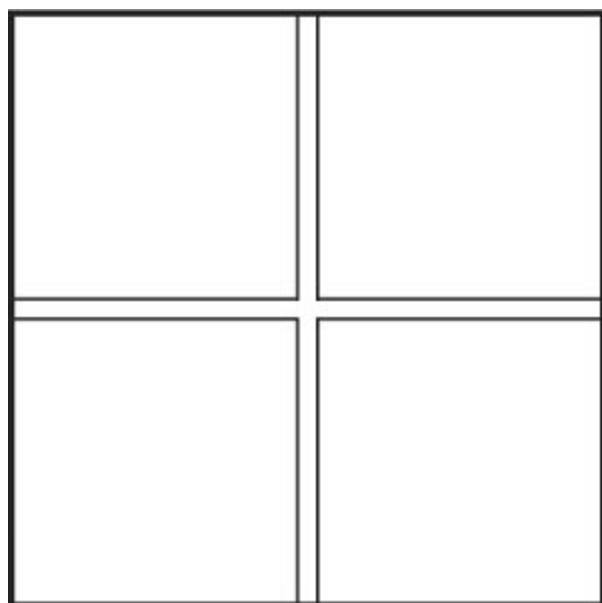
THE SUBMISSION

AMY WALDMAN



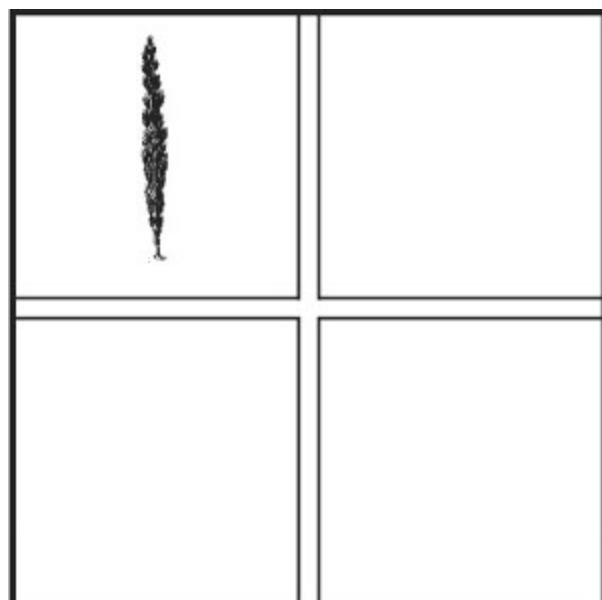
WILLIAM HEINEMANN: LONDON

To my parents, Don and Marilyn Waldman



Like the cypress tree, which holds its head high
and is free within the confines of a garden, I, too,
feel free in this world, and I am not bound by its
attachments.

—an unidentified Pashto poet



1

"The names," Claire said. "What about the names?"

"They're a record, not a gesture," the sculptor replied. Ariana's words brought nods from the other artists, the critic, and the two purveyors of public art arrayed along the dining table, united beneath her sway. She was the jury's most famous figure, its dominant personality, Claire's biggest problem.

Ariana had seated herself at the head of the table, as if she were presiding. For the previous four months they had deliberated at a table that had no head, being round. It was in an office suite high above the gouged earth, and there the other jurors had deferred to the widow's desire to sit with her back to the window, so that the charnel ground below was only a gray blur when Claire walked to her chair. But tonight the jury was gathered, for its last arguments, at Gracie Mansion's long table. Ariana, without consultation or, it appeared, compunction, had taken pride of place, giving notice of her intent to prevail.

"The names of the dead are expected; required, in fact, by the competition rules," she continued. For such a scouring woman, her voice was honeyed. "In the right memorial, the names won't be the source of the emotion."

"They will for me," Claire said tightly, taking some satisfaction in the downcast eyes and guilty looks along the table. They'd all lost, of course—lost the sense that their nation was invulnerable; lost their city's most recognizable

icons; maybe lost friends or acquaintances. But only she had lost her husband.

She wasn't above reminding them of that tonight, when they would at last settle on the memorial. They had winnowed five thousand entries, all anonymous, down to two. The final pruning should have been easy. But after three hours of talk, two rounds of voting, and too much wine from the mayor's private reserve, the conversation had turned ragged, snappish, repetitive. The Garden was too beautiful, Ariana and the other artists kept saying of Claire's choice. They saw for a living, yet when it came to the Garden they wouldn't see what she saw.

The concept was simple: a walled, rectangular garden guided by rigorous geometry. At the center would be a raised pavilion meant for contemplation. Two broad, perpendicular canals quartered the six-acre space. Pathways within each quadrant imposed a grid on the trees, both living and steel, that were studded in orchard-like rows. A white perimeter wall, twenty-seven feet high, enclosed the entire space. The victims would be listed on the wall's interior, their names patterned to mimic the geometric cladding of the destroyed buildings. The steel trees reincarnated the buildings even more literally: they would be made from their salvaged scraps.

Four drawings showed the Garden across the seasons. Claire's favorite was the chiaroscuro of winter. A snow shroud over the ground; leafless living trees gone to pewter; cast-steel trees glinting with the rose light of late afternoon; the onyx surfaces of the canals shining like crossed swords. Black letters scored on the white wall. Beauty wasn't a crime, but there was more than beauty here. Even Ariana conceded that the spartan steel trees were an unexpected touch—reminders that a garden, for all its reliance on nature, was man-made, perfect for a city in which plastic bags wafted along with birds and air-conditioner runoff mixed in with rain. Their forms would

look organic, but they would resist a garden's seasonal ebb and flow.

"The Void is too dark for us," Claire said now, as she had before. Us: the families of the dead. Only she, on the jury, stood for Us. She loathed the Void, the other finalist, Ariana's favorite, and Claire was sure the other families would, too. There was nothing void-like about it. A towering black granite rectangle, some twelve stories high, centered in a huge oval pool, it came off in the drawings as a great gash against the sky. The names of the dead were to be carved onto its surface, which would reflect into the water below. It mimicked the Vietnam Veterans Memorial but, to Claire, missed the point. Such abstraction worked when humans could lay their hands on it, draw near enough to alter the scale. But the names on the Void couldn't be reached or even seen properly. The only advantage the design had was height. Claire worried that some of the families—so jingoistic, so literal-minded—might see the Garden as conceding territory to America's enemies, even if that territory was air.

"Gardens are fetishes of the European bourgeoisie," Ariana said, pointing to the dining-room walls, which were papered with a panorama of lush trees through which tiny, formally dressed men and women strolled. Ariana herself was, as usual, dressed entirely in a shade of gruel that she had patented in homage to and ridicule of Yves Klein's brilliant blue. The mockery of pretension, Claire decided, could also be pretentious.

"Aristocratic fetishes," the jury's lone historian corrected. "The bourgeoisie aping the aristocracy."

"It's French, the wallpaper," the mayor's aide, his woman on the jury, piped up.

"My point being," Ariana went on, "that gardens aren't our vernacular. We have parks. Formal gardens aren't our lineage."

"Experiences matter more than lineages," Claire said.

"No, lineages are experiences. We're coded to have certain emotions in certain kinds of places."

"Graveyards," Claire said, an old tenacity rising within her. "Why are they often the loveliest places in cities? There's a poem—George Herbert—with the lines: 'Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart / Could have recover'd greenness?' " A college friend had written the scrap of poetry in a condolence card. "The Garden," she continued, "will be a place where we—where the widows, their children, anyone—can stumble on joy. My husband ..." she said, and everyone leaned in to listen. She changed her mind and stopped speaking, but the words hung in the air like a trail of smoke.

Which Ariana blew away. "I'm sorry, but a memorial isn't a graveyard. It's a national symbol, an historic signifier, a way to make sure anyone who visits—no matter how attenuated their link in time or geography to the attack—understands how it felt, what it meant. The Void is visceral, angry, dark, raw, because there was no joy on that day. You can't tell if that slab is rising or falling, which is honest—it speaks exactly to this moment in history. It's created destruction, which robs the real destruction of its power, dialectically speaking. The Garden speaks to a longing we have for healing. It's a very natural impulse, but maybe not our most sophisticated one."

"You have something against healing?" Claire asked.

"We disagree on the best way to bring it about," Ariana answered. "I think you have to confront the pain, face it, even wallow in it, before you can move on."

"I'll take that under consideration," Claire retorted. Her hand clamped over her wineglass before the waiter could fill it.

Paul could barely track who was saying what. His jurors had devoured the comfort food he had requested—fried

chicken, mashed potatoes, brussels sprouts with bacon—but the comfort was scant. He prided himself on getting along with formidable women—was, after all, married to one—but Claire Burwell and Ariana Montagu together strained him, their opposing sureties clashing like electric fields, the room crackling with their animus. In her critique of the Garden's beauty, of beauty itself, Paul sensed Ariana implying something about Claire.

His mind wandered to the coming days, weeks, months. They would announce the winning design. Then he and Edith would visit the Zabar's at their home in Ménerbes, a respite for Paul between the months of deliberation and the fund-raising for the memorial that would begin on his return. It would be a major challenge, with the construction of each of the two finalists estimated at \$100 million, minimum, but Paul enjoyed parting his friends from serious money. Countless ordinary Americans were sure to open their wallets, too.

Then this chairmanship would lead to others, or so Edith assured him. Unlike many of her friends, his wife did not collect Chanel suits or Harry Winston baubles, although she had quantities of both. Her eye was for prestigious positions, and so she imagined Paul as chairman of the public library, where he already sat on the board. It had more money than the Met, and Edith had pronounced Paul "literary," although Paul himself wasn't sure he'd read a novel since *The Bonfire of the Vanities*.

"Perhaps we should talk more about the local context," said Madeline, a community power broker from the neighborhood ringing the site. As if on cue, Ariana extracted from her bag a drawing she had made of the Void to show how well it would play against the cityscape. The Void's "vertical properties," she said, echoed Manhattan's. Claire arched her eyebrows at Paul. Ariana's "sketch," as she called it, was better than the drawings accompanying the submission. Claire had complained to Paul more than

once that she suspected Ariana knew the Void's designer—a student, a protégé?—because she seemed so eager to help it along. Maybe, although he didn't think Ariana had done any more for her favorite than Claire had for hers. For all her poise, Claire couldn't seem to handle not getting her way. Nor could Ariana, who was used to dominating juries without this one's slippery quota of sentiment.

The group retreated to the parlor, with its warm yellow walls, for dessert. Jorge, the chef at Gracie Mansion, wheeled in a cart laden with cakes and cookies. Then he unveiled, with little fanfare, a three-foot-high gingerbread reconstruction of the vanished towers. The shapes were unmistakable. The silence was profound.

"It's not meant to be eaten," Jorge said, suddenly shy. "It's a tribute."

"Of course," said Claire, then added, with more warmth, "It's like a fairy tale." Chandelier light glinted off the poured-sugar windows.

Paul had piled his plate with everything but the gingerbread when Ariana planted herself in front of him like a tiny spear. In concert they drifted toward a secluded corner behind the piano.

"I'm concerned, Paul," Ariana said. "I don't want our decision based too much on"—the last word almost lowed—"emotion."

"We're selecting a memorial, Ariana. I'm not sure emotion can be left out of it entirely."

"You know what I mean. I worry that Claire's feelings are having disproportionate impact."

"Ariana, some might argue that you have disproportionate impact. Your opinions command enormous respect."

"Not compared to a family member. Sorrow can be a bully."

"So can taste."

“As it should be, but we’re talking about something more profound than taste here. Judgment. Having a family member in the room—it’s like we’re letting the patient, not the doctor, decide on the best course of treatment. A little clinical distance is healthy.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Paul saw Claire deep in conversation with the city’s preeminent critic of public art. She had seven inches on him, with her heels, but she made no effort to slouch. Dressed tonight in a fitted black sheath—the color, Paul suspected, no incidental choice—she was a woman who knew how to outfit herself for maximum advantage. Paul respected this, although respect was perhaps the wrong word for how she figured in his imaginings. Not for the first time, he rued his age (twenty-five years her senior), his hair loss, and his loyalty—more institutional than personal, perhaps—to his marriage. He watched her detach herself from the critic to follow yet another juror from the room.

“I know she’s affecting,” he heard; his eyeing of Claire had been unsubtle. He turned sharply toward Ariana, who continued: “But the Garden’s too soft. Designed to please the same Americans who love impressionism.”

“I happen to like impressionism,” Paul said, not sure whether to pretend he was joking. “I can’t muzzle Claire, and you know the family members are more likely to support our design if they feel part of the process. We need the emotional information she provides.”

“Paul, you know there’s a whole critique out there. If we pick the wrong memorial, if we yield to sentimentalism, it only confirms—”

“I know the concerns,” he said gruffly: that it was too soon for a memorial, the ground barely cleared; that the country hadn’t yet won or lost the war, couldn’t even agree, exactly, on who or what it was fighting. But everything happened faster these days—the building up and tearing down of idols; the spread of disease and rumor and trends;

the cycling of news; the development of new monetary instruments, which in turn had speeded Paul's own retirement from the chairmanship of the investment bank. So why not the memorial, too? Commercial exigencies were at work, it was true: the developer who controlled the site wanted to re-monetize it and needed a memorial to do so, since Americans seemed unlikely to accept the maximization of office space as the most eloquent rejoinder to terrorism. But there were patriotic exigencies, too. The longer that space stayed clear, the more it became a symbol of defeat, of surrender, something for "them," whoever they were, to mock. A memorial only to America's diminished greatness, its new vulnerability to attack by a fanatic band, mediocrities in all but murder. Paul would never put it so crudely, but the blank space was embarrassing. Filling in that blank, as much as Edith's ambitions, was why he had wanted to chair the jury. Its work would mark not only his beloved city but history, too.

Ariana was waiting for more from Paul. "You're wasting your time on me," he said brusquely. The winner needed ten of thirteen votes; Paul had made clear he would abandon neutrality only if a finalist was one short. "If I were you, I'd go rescue Maria from Claire."

•

Claire had seen Maria heading outside, cigarette in hand, and hurried after her. She had been pleading—no other word for it—with the critic, telling him, "Just because we're memorializing the dead doesn't mean we need to create a dead place," watching him roll his head as if his neck hurt from looking up at her. But she also had been scavenging her memory for tidbits from law school: the science of juries. The Asch experiments, what did Asch show? How easily people were influenced by other people's

perceptions. Conformity. Group polarization. Normative pressures. Reputational cascades: how the desire for social approval influences the way people think and act. Which meant Claire's best chance was to get jurors alone. Maria was a public art curator who had made her mark placing large-scale artworks, including one of Ariana's, around Manhattan. This made her an unlikely defector, but Claire had to try.

"Got an extra?" she asked.

Maria handed her a cigarette. "I wouldn't have pegged you as a smoker."

"Only occasionally," Claire lied. As in never.

They were standing on the veranda, the lawn spread before them, its majestic trees mere smudges in the dark, the lights of the bridges and boroughs like proximate constellations. Maria ashed complacently over the railing onto the lawn, and although it struck Claire as somehow disrespectful, she did the same.

"A ruined garden within the walls—that I could get behind," Maria said.

"Excuse me?"

"It would be so powerful as a work of art, would answer any worries about erasing the hard memories. We have to think of history here, the long view, a symbolism that will speak to people a hundred years from now. Great art transcends its time."

"A ruined garden has no hope and that's unacceptable," Claire said, unable to help her sharpness. "You all keep talking about the long view, but the long view includes us. My children, my grandchildren, people with a direct connection to this attack are going to be around for the next hundred years, and maybe that's a blip when you look back at the Venus of Willendorf, but it certainly seems a long time now. So I don't see why our interests should count any less. You know, the other night I dreamed about that black pool around the Void, that my husband's hand

was reaching up from the water to pull me down into it. That's the effect the Void has. So you can go there and congratulate yourself on what a brilliant artistic statement you made, but I don't think family members will be lining up to visit."

Her anger was no less genuine for her having learned, months back, its power. On a wintry afternoon, as she and the other widows left a meeting with the director of the government's compensation fund, a reporter in the waiting press pack had shouted, "How do you answer Americans who say they're tired of your sense of entitlement, that you're being greedy?" Claire had gripped her purse to keep her hands from shaking, but she didn't bother to mute the tremble in her voice. "Entitlement? Was that the word you used?" The reporter shrank back. "Was I entitled to lose my husband? Was I entitled to have to explain to my children why they will never know their father, to have to raise them alone? Am I entitled to live knowing the suffering my husband endured? This isn't about greed. Do your homework: I don't need a penny of this compensation and don't plan to keep it. This isn't about money. It's about justice, accountability. And yes, I am entitled to that."

She claimed, later, to have been unaware the television cameras were rolling, but they captured every word. The clip of the death-pale blonde in the black coat was replayed so often that for days she couldn't turn on the television without seeing herself. Letters of support poured in, and Claire found herself a star widow. She hadn't meant to make a political statement, in truth had been offended by the notion that she was grubbing for money and was seeking to set herself apart from those who were. Instead she emerged as their champion, the Secretary of Sorrow Services. Her leadership, she knew, was the reason the governor had picked her for the jury.

On the veranda Maria was eyeing her quizzically. Claire met her stare and took a drag so dizzying she had to grip

the railing for support. She felt only a little guilty. Everything she said had been true except her certainty that the hand reaching up was Cal's.

Maria switched first. "The Garden," she said bravely. Claire started to mouth "Thank you," then thought better of it. The critic came next. "The Garden." This gave slightly less pleasure: Claire, studying his basset-hound face and poodle hair, had the disappointed sense that he had changed his vote because he was tired. Still, the Garden had eight votes now, which meant victory was in sight. But instead of celebrating, Claire began to sink inside. Tomorrow, absent the memorial competition, her life would lose its last bit of temporary form. She had no need of income, given her inheritance from Cal, and no commanding new cause. Her future was gilded blankness.

Aftermath had filled the two years since Cal's death, the surge of grief yielding to the slow leak of mourning, the tedium of recovery, bathetic new routines that felt old from the get-go. Forms and more forms. Bulletins from the medical examiner: another fragment of her husband had been found. The cancellation of credit cards, driver's license, club memberships, magazine subscriptions, contracts to buy works of art; the selling of cars and a sailboat; the scrubbing of his name from trusts and bank accounts and the boards of companies and nonprofits—all of it done with a ruthless efficiency that implicated her in his effacement. Offering her children memories of their father, only to load the past with so much value it strained beneath the weight.

But aftermath had to end. She sensed herself concluding a passage that had begun fourteen years ago, when a blue-eyed man notable less for good looks than for sheer vitality and humor and confidence had stopped her as she came off

the tennis court he was taking over and said, "I'm going to marry you."

The comment, she would come to learn, was typical of Calder Burwell, a man with a temperament so sunny that Claire nicknamed him California, even though it was she, having grown up there, who knew the state's true fickle weather: the frost and drought that had kept her grandfather, a citrus farmer, perched near ruin for years before her father plunged straight into it. Of all her anguished, unanswerable wonderings about Cal's death—where, how, how much pain—the worst, somehow, was the fear that his last moments had buckled his abiding optimism. She wanted him to have died believing that he would live. The Garden was an allegory. Like Cal, it insisted that change was not just possible, but certain.

"It's eleven o'clock," Paul said. "I think someone may need to reconsider his or her vote. How can we ask this country to come together in healing if this jury can't?"

Guilty looks. A long silence. And finally, from the historian, an almost speculative "Well ..." All bleary eyes turned to him, but he said nothing more, as if he had realized he held the fate of a six-acre chunk of Manhattan in his hands.

"Ian?" Paul prodded.

Even if inebriated, Ian wasn't going without a lecture. He noted the beginnings of public gardens in suburban cemeteries in eighteenth-century Europe, segued into the garden-based reforms of Daniel Schreber in Germany ("We're interested in his social reforms, not the 'reforms' he carried out on his poor sons"), jumped to the horror conveyed by Lutyens's Memorial to the Missing of the Somme at Thiepval, in which seventy-three thousand names—"Seventy-three thousand!" Ian exclaimed—were inscribed on its interior walls, pondered the difference

between “national memory” and “veteran’s memory” at Verdun, and concluded, some fifteen minutes later, with: “And so, the Garden.”

Paul, then, would be the tenth and final vote, and this didn’t displease him. He had insisted, for himself, on not just public neutrality but internal neutrality as well, so that no design had been allowed to catch his fancy. But over the course of the evening he had begun rooting for the Garden. “Stumble on joy”—the phrase had knocked something loose in him. Joy: What did it feel like? Trying to remember, he was overcome by longing. He knew satisfaction, the exhilaration of success, contentment, and happiness to the extent he could identify it. But joy? He must have felt it when his sons were born—that kind of event would surely occasion it—but he couldn’t remember. Joy: it was like a handle with no cupboard, a secret he didn’t know. He wondered if Claire did.

“The Garden,” he said, and the room broke loose, less with pleasure than relief.

“Thank you, Paul. Thank you, everyone,” Claire whispered.

Paul slumped in his chair and allowed himself some sentimental chauvinism. The dark horse had won—he hadn’t thought Claire could trump Ariana—and this seemed appropriately American. Champagne appeared, corks popped, a euphonious clamor filled the room. Paul clinked his flute to command their attention for a moment of silence in the victims’ honor. As heads bowed, he glimpsed the part in Claire’s hair, the line as sharp and white as a jet’s contrail, the intimacy as unexpected as a flash of thigh. Then he remembered to think of the dead.

He thought, too, of the day, as he hadn’t for a long time. He had been stuck in uptown traffic when his secretary called to say there had been an accident or attack and it might affect the markets. He was still going into the office in those days, not having learned yet that in an investment

bank, “emeritus” translated to “no longer one of us.” When the traffic stopped completely, Paul got out of the car. Others were standing outside looking south, some shielding their eyes with their hands, all exchanging useless information. Edith called, sobbing “It’s falling down, it’s falling down,” the nursery-rhyme words, then the mobile network went dead. “Hello? Hello? Honey?” all around, then a silence of Pompeian density so disturbing that Paul was grateful when Sami, his driver, broke it to say, “Oh sir, I hope it’s not the Arabs,” which of course it would turn out to be.

Oh sir, I hope it’s not the Arabs. Sami wasn’t Arab, but he was Muslim. (Eighty percent of Muslims were not Arab: this was one of those facts many learned and earnestly repeated in the wake of the attack, without knowing exactly what they were trying to say, or rather knowing that they were trying to say that not all Muslims were as problematic as the Arab ones, but not wanting to say exactly that.) Paul had known his driver was Muslim but never dwelt on it. Now, despite all efforts otherwise, he felt uncomfortable, and three months later, when a sorrowful Sami—was he ever any other way?—begged leave to return to Pakistan because his father was dying, Paul was relieved, although he hated to admit it. He promised Sami an excellent recommendation if he returned, politely declined to take on his cousin, and hired a Russian.

The trauma, for Paul, had come later, when he watched the replay, pledged allegiance to the devastation. You couldn’t call yourself an American if you hadn’t, in solidarity, watched your fellow Americans being pulverized, yet what kind of American did watching create? A traumatized victim? A charged-up avenger? A queasy voyeur? Paul, and he suspected many Americans, harbored all of these protagonists. The memorial was meant to tame them.

Not just any memorial now but the Garden. Paul began his remarks by encouraging the jurors to “go out there and sell it, sell it hard,” then, rethinking his word choice, urged them to “advocate” for it instead. The soft patter of the minute-taker’s typing filled the interstices of his speech, and the specter of the historical record spurred him to unsteady rhetorical heights. He drew all eyes to a gilded round mirror topped with an eagle shedding its ball and chain.

“Now, as at America’s founding, there are forces opposed to the values we stand for, who are threatened by our devotion to freedom.” The governor’s man alone nodded at Paul’s words. “But we have not been bowed, will not be. ‘Despotism can only exist in darkness,’ James Madison said, and all of you, in working so hard to memorialize the dead, have kept the lights burning in the firmament. You handled a sacred trust with grace and dignity, and your country will feel the benefit.”

Time to put a face on the design, a name with it. Another unfamiliar feeling for Paul: avid, almost childlike curiosity—glee, even—at that rarity, a genuine surprise. Best if the designer was a complete unknown or a famous artist; either would make for a compelling story to sell the design. He clumsily punched away at a cell phone that sat on the table before him. “Please bring the file for submission number 4879,” he said into the phone, enunciating the numbers slowly to avoid misunderstanding. “Four eight seven nine,” he repeated, then waited for the digits to be repeated back to him.

The jury’s chief assistant entered a few minutes later, aglow with his own importance. His long fingers clasped a slim envelope, eight and a half by eleven inches, sealed as protocol demanded. “I am dying with anticipation,” Lanny breathed as he handed the envelope to Paul, who made no

reply. The envelope's numbers and bar code matched those of the Garden; the envelope's seal was unbroken. Paul made sure both the jurors and the minute-taker noted this and waited for the reluctant assistant to take his leave.

Once the door shut, Paul picked up the silver letter opener the young man had left behind—he did have a flair for detail—and slit the flap, taking care (again, the specter of history) not to tear the envelope. His caution somehow recalled Jacob, his eldest son, at a childhood birthday party, obsessively trying not to rip the wrapping paper, even then misunderstanding where value lay. An impatient Paul had told him to hurry it along.

Hurry it along: the same message from the room's quiet, in which the jurors seemed to breathe as one. He pulled out the paper, sensing thirteen pairs of eyes upon him. To know the winner's identity before the jury, not to mention the mayor or governor or president, should have been a small but satisfying token of his stature. What better measure of how high Paul Joseph Rubin, grandson of a Russian Jewish peasant, had climbed? And yet reading the name brought no pleasure, only a painful tightening in his jaw.

A dark horse indeed.

2

The piece of paper containing the winner's name was passed from palm to palm like a fragile folio. There were a few gasps and "hmmms," an "interesting," an "oh my." Then: "Jesus fucking Christ! It's a goddamn Muslim!" The paper had reached the governor's man.

Paul sighed. It wasn't Bob Wilner's fault they were in this situation, if indeed they were in a situation, but Paul resented him for forcing them to confront that they were, possibly, in a situation. Until Wilner spoke, no one had voiced what was written, as if to do so would bring the problem, even the person, to life before them.

"Ms. Costello." Paul addressed the minute-taker in an almost musing tone, without meeting her eyes. "That will be expunged, naturally. We'd like to keep the record free of —of profanity." He knew this sounded ridiculous: What New York City body cared about profanity? What minute-taker bothered to transcribe it? "Perhaps you could step out for a few minutes. Go help yourself to some more dessert."

"Oh, Ms. Costello," Paul called as she walked toward the door, his tone as light as her back was stiff. "If you could, please make sure no one's hanging around outside the door. And let's remember our confidentiality agreements, shall we?"

The door shut. He waited a few seconds before saying, "Let's stay calm here."

"What the fuck are we supposed to do?"

"We know nothing about him, Bob."

"Is he even American?"

"Yes, it says right here under nationality, American."

"That actually makes it harder."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"How did this happen?"

"What are the odds?"

"I can't believe it."

"It's Maya Lin all over again. But worse."

"What are the odds?" the mayor's aide kept repeating.

"What are the odds?"

"One in five thousand!" Wilner barked at her. "Those are the odds."

"Maybe more," the historian mused, "if more than one Muslim entered."

"We don't know. Maybe it's just his name," Maria said. "He could be a Jew, for all we know."

"Don't be an idiot." Wilner again. "How many Jews do you know named Mohammad?"

"It's true though," the art critic said; "maybe he converted to another religion. I became a Buddhist three years ago. Or a Jew-Bu, I guess."

"Well maybe he's a woman!" Wilner said sarcastically. "Maybe he had a sex change! Wake up; it's on the page in black and white."

"I think we need to assume the worst—I mean, that he's a Muslim," the mayor's aide said. "Not that that's the worst"—she was flustered now—"I don't mean to say that at all, just that in this case it is." Her name was Violet, and she was a compulsive pessimist, always looking for the soft brown spot in the fruit, pressing so hard she created it. But even she hadn't seen this coming.

"It could be a healing gesture," observed Leo. He was a retired university president, of sonorous voice and Pavarottian girth.

"That's not the gesture that comes to mind," Wilner said. "The families will feel very offended. This is no time for multicultural pandering."

"Please don't forget you have a family member right here," Claire said.

"Fine, Claire, I apologize. Many of them will feel offended."

"I ran three universities, and in none of them was I known for pandering to multiculturalists," Leo said.

"There's a lot of confusion," Maria said. "We still don't know what most Muslims think—"

"About?"

"I don't know—us, or holy war, or—"

"We don't know if he's really the practicing kind—"

"It doesn't matter," Wilner said. "You can't opt out of the religion. They don't let you."

"I didn't know you had a degree in theology," said Leo. "Whatever kind he is, he had the right to enter the competition."

"But we have no obligation to pick him!" Wilner exclaimed. "Look, it's not his fault, whoever he is, but we have to consider the associations people will bring to him. And what if he is one of the problematic ones? Would you still say he has every right to design the memorial?"

Violet sighed. "I ... I need to talk to the mayor."

"There's nothing to talk about," Claire said. Her words were tougher than her voice, which wavered. "The vote's been taken. It's over."

"Nothing's over unless we say it is, Claire."

"Bob, you're the lawyer. You're supposed to be preventing that kind of stuff, not encouraging it. Our votes are on the record."

"The record of our proceedings is a fungible thing, Claire, and you know it. Paul's had the lady—what's her name?—Costello do minutes only when there would be nothing spicy in them."